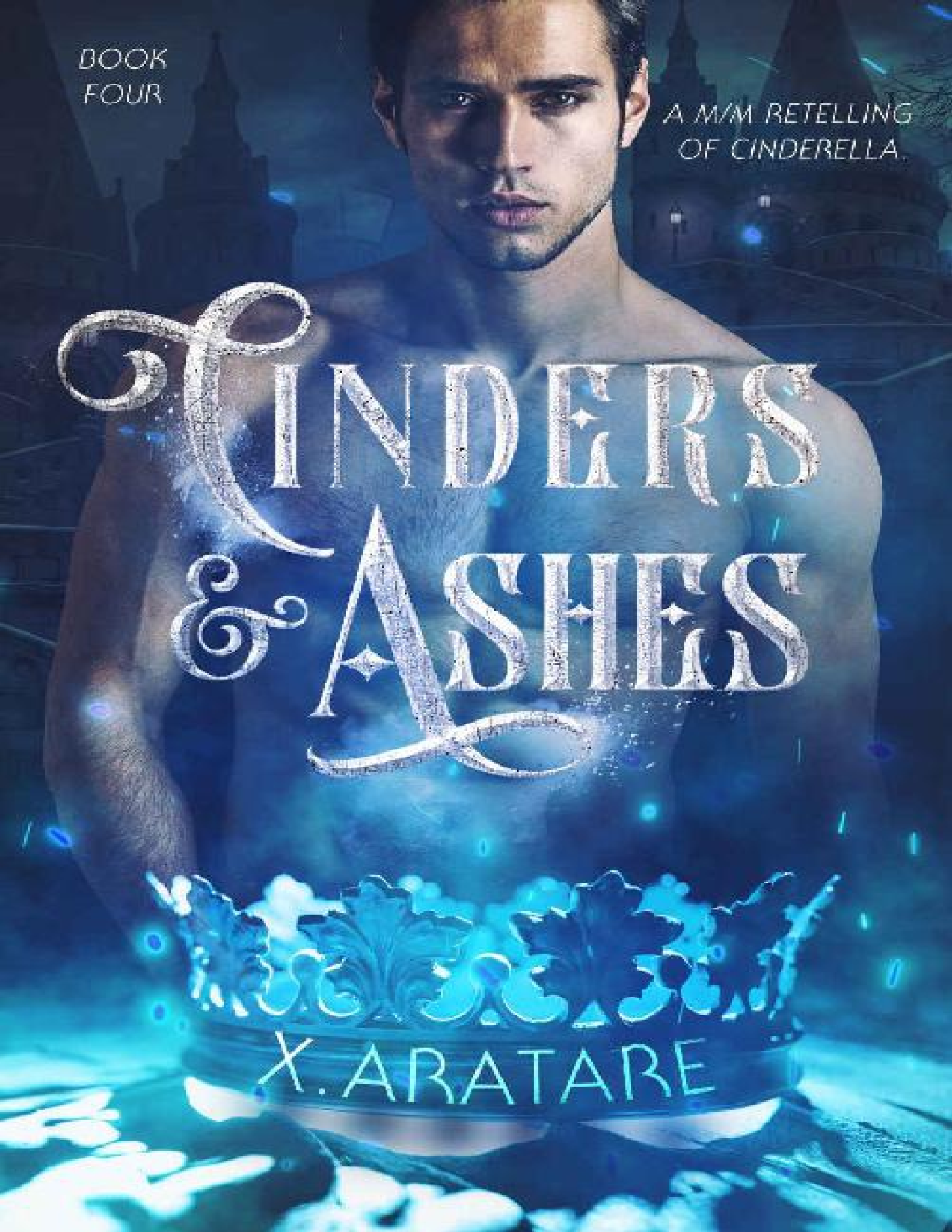
BOOK FOUR
A M/M RETELLING OF CINDERELLA.
CINDERS & ASHES
X. ARATARE

CINDERS & ASHES

A GAY RETELLING OF CINDERELLA (BOOK 4)

X. ARATARE

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WHAT'S HAPPENED SO FAR?

In *Cinders & Ashes* Book 1, Finn Ashton is a servant on his own estate, serving the needs of his obnoxious stepfamily. His stepfather, Lord Gerard Steward, is desperate to gain social approval and marry his two sons, Christopher and Miles, off to nobility. But due to his being the son of a merchant, he is seen as a social climber and would be ignored except for the fact that Tanglewood Manor is the most fertile of any in the Kingdom of Rirea. That fertility is due to Finn's magical abilities.

Finn is a half-blood Fae. His mother was (mostly) human but his unknown father was Fae. Finn has no idea who his father is and claims not to care. But he did give Finn the ability to drain life, mix it with his magic and cause the estate to bloom. He has done this every year since his mother's death when he was 5 years old. The same death that revealed his magic and his Fae heritage. Since the deaths of the prior king and queen of Rirea allegedly by the Fae King Thalanil Ravenspar's hands, all Fae found in Rirea have been put to death due to suspicions that they have loyalty to King Thalanil. Finn's stepfamily has agreed to keep his Fae blood secret in exchange for him serving them, making the estate bloom and never seeking the title of Lord of Tanglewood.

However, this year, there is so little life in Rirea that Finn is unable to honor his promise to make the estate fertile. Desperate for his stepfamily to keep his secret, Finn steals life from the Fae side of the Wall. The Wall is a magical structure that divides the human Kingdom of Rirea from the Fae Empire of the Eclipse Throne. It was erected right after the deaths of the human regents. Finn hopes this small amount of stolen life won't be noticed, but his hope is a vain one.

As a "reward" for making Tanglewood bloom, Finn's stepfamily gives him a half day off to spend mostly as he wishes. He goes into the Lupine Woods only to find a beautiful man being dragged by his horse and evidence that the Fae are aware of the stolen life.

Little does Finn know that the man he rescues is, in fact, King Rohan De Clare, King of Rirea. Rohan has as many troubles as Finn. He knows that his kingdom is dying and suspects that the Wall is draining all the fertility from the soil and changing the normal animals into monsters. His uncle urges him to consider marrying one of the nearby kings or queens to get Rirea some relief, but Rohan does not wish to surrender Rirea's independence, nor his *own*.

His uncle then suggests he, instead, have a meeting with all of the surrounding kingdoms, including the war-like and dangerous Achuviel Kingdom and its King Tearlach. That suits Rohan better as, after a magical afternoon with Finn, he cannot imagine wanting anyone but the bewitching young man with the green eyes.

Confessing his love affair to the Captain of the Guard Leonid Blanchet and his noble companion Lord Serxio Lemos, the three of them head out into the Lupine Woods to the cabin where Finn and Rohan have agreed to meet again. The goal is to spruce up the hovel for a romantic picnic. But things

do not go at all as planned.

For his part, Finn has found a new lease on life after his afternoon with the amazing Rohan, who he believes to be a simple noble lord and *not* the King of Rirea due to a misunderstanding and lie that Rohan builds upon. Finn's time is not his own as a servant, but he is determined to see Rohan again. His eldest step brother, Christopher, appears to intuit that something is going on with Finn. The two of them make a deal that Finn will help Christopher with his potions meant to restore Rirea's soil in exchange for keeping silent about whatever Finn's getting up to.

But, to Finn's dismay, the next day Christopher and Miles insist on coming into the woods with him to look for herbs for Christopher's experiments. Finn had hoped to grab the herbs and go to the cabin to meet Rohan, but now he is stuck with his step brothers.

As if things could not get more complicated for Rohan and Finn, the two parties meet each other in the woods. They must pretend not to know one another. Christopher, though, seems to recognize Rohan from somewhere. But before any secrets can get betrayed, a section of the Wall lowers and they all see the King of Wolves, Tyreon looking at them. When Tyreon begins to move--a move that will lead to an attack in Rohan's eyes--Rohan draws his crossbow and fires, but Finn jumps between the bolt and the wolf. For Finn has dreamed of the great white wolf and knows he means no harm to them.

Finn is struck by the bolt. It goes cleanly through his side. Tyreon drags Finn's unconscious body to the Fae side of the Wall. While Christopher and Miles run away, Rohan, Serxio and Leonid ride after Finn and Tyreon. While they manage to scare off the king of wolves, when they go to bring back a wounded Finn to the Rirean side of the Wall, they find that the Wall is once again intact and there is no way home.

In *Cinders & Ashes* Book 2, the book opens up with King Thalanil Ravenspar, the ruler of the Fae Empire of the Eclipse Throne, standing on one of Aymar's towers. He has sensed someone draining life from his land and worries that it is his elder brother Marikoth, a Death Mage, who was exiled from the Empire and has found a way around the Wall to strike at him. He had thought that Marikoth was killed by their father long ago, but he was not.

Like all Death Mages, Marikoth killed their mother, potentially accidentally, when he came into his power. This act made their father believe that the prophecy that if a Death Mage is allowed to live they will bring about the end of the Empire. But, out of love, their father merely exiled Marikoth and now the danger he poses continues.

But even as Thalanil is haunted by his elder brother's continued existence, he is haunted more by the love he lost. Maeve Ashton, Finn's mother, was the love of Thalanil's eternal life. She ended their relationship without any explanation. The last conversation they had was an argument about whether Death Mages should be killed simply based on a prophecy. Thalanil stated emphatically he would kill any son or daughter of his that showed the signs. Holding a hand against her stomach protectively, Maeve violently disagreed. And that was the last he saw of her.

Thalanil is left alone on the tower of Aymar with an exiled brother and a dead lover and no one and nothing to love.

Next, we turn to Rohan and Finn. These two lovers are separated. Finn's wound from the spelled silver bolt requires a Fae healer and Rohan is intent on finding one. The Wall remains in place and there is no sign of Tyreon, King of the Wolves, to take it down again. The only way to save Finn is on this side of the Wall. He and Serxio seek out a nearby village in the Empire leaving Leonid to watch over an unconscious Finn. But Rohan and Serxio find more than what they bargained for!

The Fae village is surrounded by a magical fence and Battle Mages patrol the area making it

impossible for Rohan and Serxio to get inside. The need for the magical fence becomes apparent to both men as the forest is not only very alive but antagonistic with vines constantly curling around ankles or wrists.

While they are trying to figure out how to get into the village and find a healer, a group of Fae and humans exit it. The humans are bound wrist and ankle with chains. They are led to a standing stone out in the forest, secured to it, and seemingly left there for some terrible fate. Rohan and Serxio decide that they must rescue these poor people. As Rohan is cutting through their chains with his magical sword, Lightbringer, something stirs in the forest.

Spiders.

Giant spiders.

Including one named Hex, which is so large as to more resemble an elephant in size than a spider at all. Rohan sends Serxio and one of the few freed humans, Thomas, to go back to the village and gain the help of Thomas' mistress, a Fae healer, for Finn while Rohan continues to free the chained humans and faces Hex. While Serxio, reluctantly, and Thomas, eagerly, run away, Rohan battles Hex. As he does so, Lightbringer's power seems to grow and change with Rohan feeling that he and the sword have become *one*.

Rohan is successful in his battle with Hex but only one of the humans survives it, a woman named Emma. She had earlier warned him that Thomas "has no honor" and she is more than right. Thomas and Serxio return with Thomas' mistress, a Fae priestess named Ryleth, but Serxio is in chains and Ryleth, far from being pleased that Rohan has killed Hex, claims that he has sentenced everyone in her village to death. She sends a bolt of magic at Rohan, sending him into unconsciousness.

In the meantime, Finn is dreaming, but thinks he is awake. He is in the Lupine Woods. He is searching for Rohan and the cabin where they were to meet that day to have a picnic. But no matter what direction he goes all he finds are more trees and no cabin. He feels feverish and weak, along with occasional sharp pains in his side, as if he is suffering from a great illness. But has no recollection of being shot by Rohan or of the events that led to him being dragged into the Empire.

Eventually, Finn does find the cabin, but things are still strange. The woods around the cabin form an impenetrable wall as soon as he enters the clearing. The grass there is sweet and not poisoned. There are signs of occupation in the cabin, but Finn fears it is someone other than Rohan. His illness worsens.

But all seems to get better when Rohan emerges from the cabin, full of joy to see Finn. Yet, for a moment, Finn feels a sense of terrible danger even though this is Rohan who would never hurt him. He's coaxed into the cabin where mounds of furs and blankets await him along with a roaring fire and a feast fit for a king.

But the fire seems to give off no warmth, at first. Also, Rohan seems oddly unconcerned with certain things like the fact that Tempest is not outside and the woods have formed an impenetrable barrier. But Finn believes that it is his illness making him imagine things, but he doesn't drink the wine that Rohan offers him…

He and Rohan begin to talk about magic where Finn learns about Death Magic and Death Mages for the first time. He is surprised and happy that Rohan seems to know so much. He has never dared speak of magic with anyone else for fear that they would guess he has Fae blood. But with Rohan those concerns are not there.

Yet the conversation takes an odd and terrible turn as Rohan begins to mock Finn for having small dreams. Wanting a bit of meat and a warm fire as his fantasy to be with Rohan, not even wishing to be at the man's estate, appears pathetic in Rohan's eyes. Finn then realizes that this is not Rohan at all.

The being pretending to be his love is a Fae Death Mage called Marikoth.

Marikoth imprisons Finn as he tells Finn that he's dying and this is just a dream. The Fae Death Mage explains that he noticed Finn because Finn drained life from the Empire and he wants to know who he is and how much he knows about Death Magic. Marikoth reveals more than he finds out from Finn, because Finn knows nothing about his heredity or his magic. Marikoth is the exiled brother of King Thalanil Ravenspar who is intent on getting revenge on his family and taking the throne for himself. He reveals that Death Mages are only born from the Ravenspar line so Finn *must* be the son of Marikoth and Thalanil's father, or Thalanil, or perhaps even Marikoth himself. Horrified, Finn denies this even as he fears it is true.

But Finn's shock is cut off as he suddenly is sent into a vision. He is in Rohan's paralyzed body as Ryleth, her assistant Tela, her slave Thomas, and Serxio hawk over him. They are discussing Serxio and Rohan's fate. Hex, far from being a monster that they wanted destroyed, was a creature the Fae had made a deal with. In exchange for sacrifices, Hex and her children provided the Fae a defense against other, terrible creatures in the forest. Now, with the deal broken, Hex's children will attack the village so the Fae villagers must flee to the summer palace of Aymar.

Tela wants to simply kill Rohan and Serxio for their acts, but Ryleth sees Lightbringer. She recognizes it as Vudine, the magical sword of House Aeternal, the former Fae rulers of the Empire. Though Serxio tells her that Lightbringer has been in Rohan's family for ages, she believes he must have stolen it due to him being human or, at least, *appearing* to be so. But she decides that this is beyond her pay grade and Rohan's fate should be decided by King Thalanil himself. Ryleth also believes that King Thalanil must be told how bad the overgrowth is in the Empire, because their letters begging for help have not had any effect.

Finn is transported out of the vision. Finn realizes from his vision that Rohan is in danger and he must save him. He begs Marikoth to let him go and to even allow Finn to drain a little energy from Marikoth to save himself from death. Marikoth laughs at this.

While fascinated by this vision Finn experienced, Marikoth decides he is going to kill Finn by draining him anyways. Over Marikoth's shoulder, Finn sees a raven made of old feathers, bones and energy. This bird grows until it is a monstrous shadow while Marikoth, unaware, behaves like a drug addict at the thought of draining Finn's life.

Marikoth tries to kill Finn, but his powers don't work on Finn at all. Instead, Finn drains Marikoth. With this first taste of life, Finn almost loses control to the point that he almost kills Marikoth. But Marikoth manages to free himself. Just before he flees the death dream, he sees the massive magical raven and acts both afraid and betrayed at its appearance here before disappearing.

The raven leads Finn out of the death dream and Finn wakes up in the Empire. The life he stole from Marikoth and from the surrounding vegetation there heals his wounds. He has to lie to Leonid about how this happens, believing that Leonid would fear or hate him if he knew Finn had Fae blood, let alone was a Death Mage. He convinces Leonid that Serxio and Rohan are in trouble and they need to go find them.

Rohan wakes up in a cart, chained with Serxio and Emma, the human woman he saved from Hex. The whole village is traveling to Aymar. Ryleth has Lightbringer on her saddle. They intend to get to the village of Tradavor that night and rest before moving on. Rohan begs her to send someone back to get Finn who is dying. He argues with her that her deal with Hex couldn't have continued indefinitely, because she would have run out of humans to sacrifice to it, and pleads for her not to let Finn die for his actions. Ryleth refuses to help him, because the spiders are coming and her people are her only concern.

The spiders harry them all the way to Tradavor. When they get to the village, the priest of the Tradavor, Samron, refuses to let them in and traps them outside to be killed by the remaining spiders in order to save his own deal with the forest.

Rohan's connection to Lightbringer bursts into life and the sword flies to him. He finds himself repeating an ancient mantra that indicates he is the heir to House Aeturnal. He uses the magic within himself with Lightbringer as a focus to kill all of the spiders while sparing all of the Fae. The Fae, Ryleth especially, recognize that Rohan is a fated ruler of the Empire. They are welcomed into Tradavor because of this.

The magical raven, that only Finn can see, leads him and Leonid to the abandoned village where an Ostil, an enraged tree creature, has entered the space. Leonid tells Finn to run while he sacrifices himself to it so that one of them can get to Rohan and Serxio. Finn determines to use his magic. The raven starts to speak to Finn, urging him to kill the Ostil, but Finn refuses, instead communicating with the enraged creature and convincing it to let them go. Leonid realizes that Finn is magical, but is not afraid but grateful.

Rohan awakes in Tradavor, completely exhausted by the use of his magic, and unable to even stand. He is intent on saving Finn. He makes a deal with Ryleth that he will protect her people on the way to Aymar if she sends someone to bring Finn here and heals him. She agrees and Tela and Serxio are sent to look for Leonid and Finn.

Finn and Leonid hide when Tela and Serxio appear on the road, not realizing who they are at first. Finn uses his Death Magic to paralyze Tela while they greet Serxio. Tela realizes that Finn is a Death Mage at that moment. Assured she is not an enemy, Finn releases Tela and the four of them go back to Tradavor and Finn is reunited with Rohan.

Finn finally tells Rohan the truth about his Fae heritage and his Death Magic. Rohan completely accepts him. They realize that their magic works together. Finn drains life to feed it to Rohan. Rohan has the Aeturnal ability to imbue weapons, jewelry and buildings with enchantments, storing raw magical power within them. They see the possibility of draining the excess life from the Empire and using it to restore the life in Rirea. But that will only work if King Thalanil agrees. Rohan thinks it won't be safe to meet King Thalanil at Aymar, but, instead, to leave a letter with Ryleth to send to him after they figure out a way to get back to Rirea.

They make their way along the road to Aymar, but the forest is aggressive and blocks their path. Finn drains the excess life from the questing, invasive vines, but he takes too much inside himself and fails to feed the excess energy to Rohan. He releases the energy, carving a massive canyon in the forest. Those that didn't realize he was a Death Mage, do now. Only Ryleth is pleased by this development.

It turns out that Ryleth used to be the head of her order, but her belief that the Aeturnals and Death Mages are necessary to control the overgrowth in the Empire was considered heretical and she was stripped of her titles and sent to the tiny village as punishment. She gives Finn translated pages about a love story between the two last Aeturnal and Death Mage couples. She urges him to understand that he and Rohan are meant to be and that their abilities can save both the Empire and Rirea.

Just as they are about to enter Aymar, they discover that Emma has been murdered by Thomas. She found out that Thomas and Tela intended to out Rohan and Finn to Ryleth's old order. They killed her to stop her from telling Rohan and Finn their plan. Ryleth, Rohan, Finn, Serxio and Leonid chase Tela and Thomas into Aymar, but end up splitting up with Finn going after Tyreon.

Tyreon leads Finn to King Thalanil. Thalanil recognizes Finn as the one that drained life from his Empire and a Death Mage. He alleges that Finn is a killer. Finn claims not, but then Thalanil reveals

that every Death Mage kills their mother upon entering into his power. Finn realizes then that he killed his own mother. Her wasting disease wasn't a disease at all, but was caused by him draining her.

Thalanil is about to kill Finn when he sees Finn's eyes and sees that they are the same as Maeve Ashton's, the woman he loved. This leads to the revelation that Finn is his son and that the reason Maeve ended their relationship was because she feared Thalanil would kill him because she knew he would be a Death Mage.

Instead of wanting to kill Finn, Thalanil agrees to spare Rohan, Serxio and Leonid's lives if Finn will remain with him in Aymar. The Fae king then demonstrates his great power by sending Rohan, Serxio and Leonid through a magical portal back to Rirea. He promises Rohan that if Rohan ever sets foot in the Empire again, he will be killed.

In *Cinders & Ashes* Book 3, the story begins in Rirea with Marikoth saving a young farm boy, Jeremy, from two neighborhood thugs who have ill intent towards him and his sister, Hannah. But just when Jeremy thinks he's been saved, it turns out that Marikoth is a more deadly monster. It is clear that Marikoth is walking free in the Lupine Woods and doing whatever he wants.

Finn and Rohan are separated by the Wall and their duties, though both long for each other and vow to find a way to be together. Finn and his father, King Thlanail, bond over their mutual love of wyverns and flying. They begin to learn one another as people as well as father and son, and discover there is a lot to enjoy about one another. But there are two points upon which they violently disagree.

The first point is about Finn's Death Magic. Finn begs his father to help him learn how to control it and use it for good. Thalanil believes that Finn can simply never use it and, instead, learn traditional magic. Finn wants to believe that's true, but, in his heart, he senses it isn't. But Thalanil will not be moved. Finn is determined to find Ryleth and ask her to teach him.

The second point is about Rohan. Finn insists that Rohan is not only an honorable man and great king, but that Finn loves him and all of Rirea. He wants to be by Rohan's side. And he desires his father to help heal Rirea's dying land, which may require dealing with Marikoth, who lurks somewhere beyond the Wall.

Thalanil believes that he is saving Finn from heartbreak by not allowing him to hold onto things outside of the immortal lands. While Rohan *might* have enough Aeturnal blood in him to be immortal, he might not. Watching Rohan wither and die will be agonizing, not to mention all the mortals that Finn has known up to that point. Better to stay behind the Wall and outlast them and Marikoth. Further, his father reveals that Marikoth, not Thalanil, killed Rohan's parents. They had made a deal with Marikoth to help him overthrow Thalanil, but had repented at the last moment and Marikoth had killed them due to their betrayal. The meeting on the cliffs was to warn Thalanil about his brother's continued existence, but it ended in their deaths, Thalanil's near escape from Marikoth, and the raising of the Wall to keep Marikoth out.

But the raven leads Finn to a Luminus, a magical communication device that Finn recognizes as a twin to one his mother had in Rirea. His father confesses that he and Finn's mother communicated over the Luminus, which syncs time between the two lands when someone is within the Luminus' orbit. But he forbids Finn from using it to contact Rohan or his friends in Rirea. But Finn is not to be deterred. He realizes that the paired Luminus is in Miles' bedroom and if he could but convince one of his stepbrothers to take the Luminus to Rohan, he could speak to the Rirean king! And he does just that!

He secretly speaks to both his stepbrothers over the Luminus and discovers some very distressing things. First, his family and the servants all thought Finn was dead. The servants, Magna, Emmott and Jacob left Tanglewood when his stepfather refused to allow them to have a funeral. In order to punish

Christopher for "losing" Finn out in the Lupine Woods, his stepfather has turned Christopher into the family scapegoat and slave. Gerard has sold or destroyed all of Christopher's alchemical equipment, is starving and beating Christopher, and has retreated into drinking heavily every day.

Finn convinces his stepbrothers to load the Luminus into a cart and take it to Reave Castle and King Rohan. He explains that his stepbrothers will be safe from Gerard there. Christopher eagerly agrees, but Miles only does so when Finn lies that he'll come back to the Manor and serve them. In the end though, Christopher is the only one to take the Luminus and escape Tanglewood while Miles retreats back to Gerard in fear. Through sheer will and determination, Christopher makes it to Reave Castle and Rohan who takes him in.

While that has been Finn's experience, Rohan has spent every day searching for the tree with leaves of glass, determined to destroy the Wall and get to Finn. He works alongside his beloved friends, Serxio and Leonid, but also with his Uncle Hugues, who Rohan isn't sure he can trust. For when they were sent back from the Empire to Rirea, he found that his uncle had already taken the throne and contacted the leaders of Bolan, Sultane and the Achuviel Kingdom to come for a summit at Reave Castle to discuss an alliance against Thalanil.

While Hugues cedes the throne back to Rohan, Rohan discovers that his uncle knew not only about Finn's existence as the son of his former lover and King Thalanil, but also the horrible circumstances that Finn was living in yet did nothing to help him. Further, Hugues' seeming deep knowledge of the Aeturnals disturbs Rohan. He feels he cannot trust his uncle even as the man provides him with books that speak of the Aeturnals and how they ruled with their "Bonded Ones" until the gods turned against them.

Serxio had a mad plan to stand on the old road that connected Aymar and Reave Castle, right by the Wall, and have a banner trying to get Thalanil--but, more importantly, Finn's--attention. Rohan no longer believes that Thalanil is his enemy, but rather it is Marikoth, but he needs all the help he can get against the Death Mage. But on their way to put up the banner, a mob of people from the city meets them in the streets.

It turns out that homeless and poor people have been disappearing from the city recently and the mayor has refused to investigate. Rohan does and finds Hannah, the young farm girl whose brother, Jeremy, was "saved" by Marikoth whom she calls the "Glowing Man" in town. The girl explains in halting terms what the Glowing Man did to her brother and neighbors and warns that she's seen him in town. Rohan, Serxio and Leonid realize that Marikoth is stalking Dawnmore's streets and beyond. They must track him down and stop him!

They start their hunt for Marikoth at Hannah and Jeremy's old farmhouse. They soon find strange tracks that lead into the Lupine Woods. Following these, they come upon a beautiful glade where someone is clearly living, except they aren't there at that moment, but three undead are, Jeremy included.

Rohan, Serxio and Leonid battle the three undead, realizing that the only thing that can kill them is fire. But after those three are dead, they hear countless undead moans from all around them. Rohan exhausts his magic to protect himself and his friends from the undead horde, but they would have been overcome had not King Tearlach and his warriors ridden to their aid.

The giant Achuvien king still seems to have romantic intentions towards Rohan, but he keeps them light and teasing, even when he realizes that Rohan cares for someone else. But he does reveal that he, too, knows Marikoth. The Death Mage had been his Court Magician until Marikoth betrayed him in some way. The undead, Tearlach claims, are Marikoth's creations and he has been tracking the Death Mage and the undead from his own kingdom. He's also there for the summit.

They return to Reave Castle and discover Christopher there with the Luminus. They are able to all speak to Finn and fill each other in on everything that's happened. Finn is alarmed at talk of the undead. He is glad that Christopher is safe and it is agreed that Christopher will stay on at the castle as an alchemist. Rohan gives Christopher some of the books he discovered in Marikoth's glade to examine. They need to know how Marikoth is turning villagers into the creatures they faced.

Finn and Rohan promise that they will speak to one another regularly over the Luminus to keep each other informed as well as simply to see one another. Finn is convinced he can change Thalanil's mind about Rohan. But before they get to speak again things take a dark turn in the Empire.

While Finn is outside Aymar's walls--having found Ryleth and other villagers--the palace is attacked by hundreds of enraged Ostils, the tree-like creatures that Finn faced before in Ryleth's village. He and Ryleth go to help with Finn believing he can possibly speak to the Ostils like he had earlier. But they cannot be reached. They are insane and intent on killing everyone. Finn realizes he has no other choice but to use Death Magic to save the day.

Thalanil has been trapped inside with his Council, including Lord Paquen--who is eager to get more power--and Lady Beinelis--Thalanil's trusted friend--sparring over whether there's something suspicious about Thalanil's human-looking son, Finn. There are rumors already that he's a Death Mage. When the Ostils come, and Finn levitates into the sky, and destroys them all except one to go back tell others to stay away, all doubts are gone.

But Finn collapses after the battle and falls into a death-like sleep where the raven speaks to him. It claims to be the God of Death and Finn is its Chosen. Then Finn is thrust into a strange vision. It's of Christopher in the lower levels of Reave Castle being chased by the undead...

And that brings us up to date!

THE UNDEAD WALK

Hannah listened intently at the door for the *noises*. The soft, uncertain noises. The noises that she had heard in the dead of night before her brother was taken from her. Noises that seemed to always accompany the Glowing Man.

But this door was in the kitchen of Reave Castle! The king had promised that the Glowing Man couldn't get in here! And the door didn't lead outside, but instead went deeper into the royal home. It led to the cellars below where they stored the winter root vegetables, the oil, the dried herbs and the cooking wine. There was another door down there that connected the cellar to the rest of the castle's lower levels, but those, too, were secure. Nothing could be down there. Certainly not the Glowing Man.

It was Hannah's job to go down and get things for Cook Shelton from the cellar, so long as it wasn't too heavy for her to lift and carry. Cook was teaching her how to prepare the delicious meals that fed even the king! One day, Hannah hoped to wear the starched white apron and hat that Cook Shelton wore. It was a uniform, but a *better* uniform than even the Guard had. She'd do anything to wear it herself. But, today, she didn't want to do her one task, which was to go down into the cellar. She picked at the hem of her dress anxiously.

"Hannah, I needed the rosemary *yesterday*, dearest!" Cook Shelton called to her from over the bird she was plucking.

Hannah popped into the air like she was a corn kernel in hot oil. Her mouth opened to explain about the *noises* and the Glowing Man, but before she did the pink-cheeked cook let out an exasperated sigh.

"Hannah," she sounded quite annoyed, "no time to be daydreaming, girl, go get me the rosemary right quick! Off with you!"

Blinking rapidly, Hannah clutched at the front of her plain--if pretty--gray dress. She even had *shoes* and hair ribbons. She had a warm place to sleep that was all her own and plenty to eat. She had never had so much in terms of material comfort. And Cook Shelton was so kind to her. She asked Hannah for so little in return. She had to do what Cook wanted.

Just as Cook was about to ask again, Hannah opened the heavy wood and metal banded door. The cool air of the cellar washed over her. It was scented with the smells of water and stone and… was that the faintest scent of rot? If it was, it was likely just something in the pantry that had gone off. That was all. This was the castle. It was *safe*.

Drawing in a deep breath, Hannah placed a foot on the first stone step. She swallowed. No noises. Just silence and an odd echoey sensation that always seemed to occur in the castle's lower levels. There were times when she was down there where she would imagine she was on the

threshold of a magical place. There were times these imaginings were so strong that she thought she saw figures with pointed ears in black and gold robes casting magical spells out of the corner of her eye. The Glowing Man had pointed ears, too, but he was not like these ghostly figures that somehow radiated warmth and comfort and the smell of flowers. When she tried to look at them directly they disappeared. They were only in her mind, of course. They weren't real.

She shook herself. The last thing she needed was for her imagination to be on high alert. The cellar was well lit with torches on the wall and candles placed strategically on barrels. There were no shadows to be afraid of.

Normally, she liked going down there to smell the herbs and check the potatoes. She tried to hold onto that and forced herself to take that first step then the next and then the next until she made it to the cellar's floor. She drew her arms around herself. It was always cool down here, but it felt colder because of the draft from under the other door that led deeper into the castle's depths. And that smell--the sweet, rank smell--was stronger down here. It flowed on the breeze with an unpleasant tang.

The rosemary was hanging, like the rest of the herbs, from hooks near that other door. She could see the forest of dried and drying plants. She shivered, but forced herself to scamper towards the herbs and the source of the smell. The rosemary with its piney needles and woody stems was near the outer edge of the grouping of herbs. All she had to do was reach up and grab the whole bundle. Cook Shelton always measured herbs by eye. It was never the same amount twice even in the same recipe, because sometimes the herbs weren't as pungent and made the accompanying flavors weak while, at other times, only a small pinch was needed. So Hannah was to bring the bunch and not just a few stalks.

She scurried over to the table that rested below the herbs. She felt the draft from underneath the other door. It pushed her towards the table with its faint, foul odor. She couldn't hear the noises, if there were any, because her heart thumped so loudly in her ears that it blocked everything else out. She pulled out a step stool that sat underneath the scarred wooden table. She wasn't tall enough to take the herb bundles off the hooks without it. Her legs were jangling like loose wires as she struggled to step up onto the stool.

She grasped hold of the table to steady herself. Her head whipped around towards the door deeper into the depths of the castle. She thought she heard something. A moan? A cry? The rasp of frantic breathing? The hiss of air through clenched teeth? The Glowing Man never made such sounds. And, truth be told, his victims didn't either. They smiled and looked dreamily at him as if his beauty were an answer to their prayers. But she quickened her actions nonetheless. She swung back to the herbs, steadying herself with one hand on the table while she reached up with the other.

She grasped the herb bundle. Some of the dried needles shook loose and stuck to her palm. More fell to the table with a dry rattle. She had to lift the herbs up towards the hook so that the string that held them in place would disengage. But she wasn't able to get high enough with one hand still placed on the table. Yet she needed that support as her knees were knocking together!

Her head whipped around towards the door again. There was definitely a sound now. A lot of sounds. The scuffing of feet. The sharp, hard intake of breath. Guttural moans and grunts. Coming nearer and nearer.

Terrified, Hannah tugged at the bundle of herbs so hard that the string binding it together snapped. She fell back, her feet flying out from under her, as she fell to the floor that seemed a million miles away. She landed heavily on her left shoulder. The air was propelled out of her lungs. The pain that came afterwards stopped her from drawing in a breath for long moments.

Then the pounding on the door began.

Hissing with pain and cringing with fear, Hannah rolled over onto her throbbing side to face the door into the deeper parts of the castle. The door shuddered as the pounding grew more frantic. But that confused her. Monsters weren't frantic. They were relentless. They were inexorable. But they weren't frantic.

"OPEN UP! OPEN UP! THEY'RE RIGHT BEHIND ME!" A young man screamed.

A young man. Not a monster. Not the Glowing Man either. She recognized his voice. It was Christopher, the alchemist to the king. He hardly ever ate so Cook was always coming up with delicious morsels to tempt him and sighing when they did not. Christopher's lab was down in the lower levels. It must be him!

"PLEASE! BY THE GODS, PLEASE!" Christopher yelled. "THEY'RE ALMOST HERE!"

Hannah scrambled to her feet, wincing as her shoulder was jostled by the movement, and hobbled to the door. There was a thick bolt that was drawn closed. More pounding. More frantic breathing.

"I'm coming!" she cried as she reached up for the bolt.

"HURRY!" Christopher cried.

The bolt was high up on the door. She had to get up on her tiptoes and stretch as far as she could to grasp the bolt handle and pull it to the side. It didn't move. It was stuck!

"PLEASE! HURRY!" Christopher screamed.

Christopher was always so calm, cool and collected. She wouldn't have believed he could scream if she hadn't just heard it.

Hannah used all of her strength to wrench the bolt open. It held and held and then, finally, slid free with a *thunk*! The sound was so loud. Christopher heard it and the door was opening before she could even let go of the handle. Christopher slipped inside and slammed the door shut behind him. His fingers scrabbled for the bolt she had just slid open. With much less effort, he slid it back in place again. The moans of the undead filled the air and slow, steady thumps started against the door. Christopher braced his back against the door.

She looked up into his handsome face. It was white as snow except for the blood that ran down from his left temple and stained his cheek, jaw and tunic.

"W-what is that?" she asked as the door shuddered behind Christopher. *What* not *who*.

He grimaced and said, "The undead. We need the Guard. The castle is under attack!"

WARNING

The undead are coming! They're in the castle! Everyone is in danger!

Prince Finrael Ravenspar flew upwards in his bed in Aymar Palace in the Fae Empire of the Eclipse Throne. But he didn't see his gorgeous green and silver jewel-toned bedding or the warm, maple wood floors or the wash of sunshine that came through the open balcony doors. He still was caught in the dream where he saw his stepbrother, Christopher, running for his life down a stone hallway from the undead. Blood streamed down Christopher's forehead from a gash. Panic washed the rest of his stepbrother's skin as white as paper. The undead were gaining on him.

"Christopher!" Finn screamed.

His right hand shot out towards his phantom stepbrother. He reached for his magic at the same time, but his insides felt scraped clean.

"Prince Finrael? Thank goodness, you're awake!" Ryleth's voice cut through the haze of the dream.

Not a dream. It's a vision!

His right hand closed around the necklace, the Eye of the Raven, that still hung around his neck. His father had said that it warned when a loved one was in danger.

Christopher is in danger. Rohan is in danger. Serxio and Leonid and everyone are in danger! Marikoth has sent his undead to Reave Castle!

Finn shifted his legs off the side of the bed. He felt so strange, as if his head wasn't fully attached to his body. But he had to get up! Time was of the essence. Ten minutes here could be an hour in Rirea. He didn't know if what he'd dreamed had already happened or was the future. Either way he needed to get to the Luminus and warn Rohan that he was under attack. *Now*

"Prince Finrael, you need to stay still and rest!" Ryleth's hands were on his shoulders, trying to ease him back against the mound of pillows.

"No--no! I have to--to--stop them!" Finn cried. "I have to save everyone!"

"But you already did."

"No! They're coming! They're--"

"Don't you remember what happened? You already stopped the attack of Ostils on the palace. You used a lot of magic. You fell unconscious," she explained. "You're still recovering. But everything is all right."

Finn's mind reeled for a moment. The undead were replaced by memories of the attacking Ostils. He remembered how it had felt to drain the forest not only of the extra life but of *all* life. How he'd wanted to keep going. How he'd never wanted to stop.

Then there had been the satisfaction of using the extra power to obliterate the creatures. And it hadn't been just one time he'd gone through that cycle of draining and destruction, but many. Over and over and over. He had loved and hated every minute of it. Regardless though, it explained why he felt so weak and confused. He'd drained himself to the dregs. He needed more life before he could even stand.

No! I don't have time for this weakness! They're in danger!

He tried to shake Ryleth's hands off, but she stayed by his side with ease as he was weak as a kitten. She didn't understand his distress. She didn't know what he'd seen. She didn't know about the undead! No one but Christopher and the person who had let them into the castle did. And now Finn.

"I do remember, but that doesn't matter now!" Finn explained as he successfully brushed her hands off this time and struggled to his feet. But his legs gave way beneath him.

"Whoa!" Ryleth caught him and held him up. "Hold on there! Sit down, Prince--"

"I can't sit, Ryleth! There's no time!" Finn forced his knees to lock and tried to take an unsteady step, but he nearly collapsed to the floor again.

This can't be happening! Not now! Please!

"You destroyed all the Ostils, Prince Finrael," Ryleth repeated. "There's no danger--"

"The undead are in Reave Castle!"

She stared at him in shock. "*Reave* Castle? I don't recognize--"

"Rohan's castle! In Rirea! The undead are coming up through the catacombs!" he cried.

She stared at him. "But how could you know--"

"I can see!" He gripped the necklace and held it out to her.

"Magical…" Her eyes widened as she recognized the enchantment in the jewelry.

"Yes! I have to warn Rohan! Please--please don't ask me to explain. Just help me!" He begged.

"How?"

"I need to get to the Luminus!"

Her eyes widened a fraction again, but she nodded. "All right. Where is the Luminus?"

"The Wyvern Tower," he said.

"Where is that?" she asked.

He grimaced. He barely remembered the path the raven had taken him to get there the other night. But he knew that it had been far from the dining room and his bedroom was even farther away than that. How could he get there like *this*? He could barely take a step!

"My father... he'll know. He can contact Rohan," Finn told her as he realized that he needed the king's help. It would mean his father would also know that he had used the Luminus before against his will. But it didn't matter. Only saving Rohan and the others did.

She grimaced. "I'm sorry, Prince Finrael, but the king has gone to see your grandfather. He believes your grandfather will know more about Death Magic because of his experiences with Marikoth. Your father wants to help you."

Finn blinked. He *did* remember overhearing them talk about that. "How long will he be gone?"

"It is quite a distance even on a wyvern. I do not believe he will be back for at least a few days, if not a week. Maybe longer," she said with a helpless shrug.

They couldn't wait *minutes*, let alone hours or days.

Despair filled him. By that time the undead would have overwhelmed the castle and killed everyone. In the next ten minutes *here* it might be too late to save his stepbrother and warn Rohan about what had surmounted the castle's defenses.

"Perhaps a servant could go or lead me… but I wonder if it would even work," she said, biting

her lip. “It is a Luminus likely attuned to royal blood. It might only work if a Ravenspar uses it--”

“We can’t risk that!” Finn cried. “I have to get to the Luminus *now* to warn Rohan about the undead or it really will be too late.”

But he could hardly take a few steps on his own.

Ryleth stared at him for long moments. He had no idea what she was thinking. But whatever it was, she had come to a conclusion as she took in a deep breath and straightened. “Then there’s only one way. Put your hand on my chest.”

He did as she asked, placing his right hand just above her heart. His hand was trembling. He was so weak! What could he do when he was like this?

“Now, just take a little of my life,” she said.

“WHAT?!” He snatched his hand back as he realized what she was suggesting, but she caught his wrist and resisted his weak attempts to draw it away.

“It’s all right! I’m giving this to you,” she insisted.

“You want me to drain you?! That’s insane, Ryleth!”

Her eyes met his and she held his gaze. She did not blink. “I saw what you did against the Ostils. You were controlled. You didn’t hurt any of the people.”

“That’s not true, Ryleth! I drained the forest to the roots! I didn’t--”

“You controlled it, Finn,” she used his first name, the name he really thought of as his. “You did. I know the desire to feed is great, but you didn’t let it overwhelm you. You won’t now. You won’t hurt me.”

Finn closed his eyes tightly. “I’m *hungry*, Ryleth. I’m drained to the dregs right now.”

“You won’t hurt me,” she repeated with certainty.

He thought of Christopher’s pale-as-paper face and the waterfall of blood running down his cheek. He imagined Rohan laughing and talking with Serxio and Leonid, completely unaware of the danger, as Christopher was taken down, his flesh crushed between gray, dead teeth.

I can’t let that happen. I will control myself. I will not make Ryleth regret her generosity or trust in me.

He focused on Ryleth. “I want you to pull away the moment you feel I’m taking too much.”

“Take enough. Take what you need,” she said.

There was a *caw*! His head snapped towards his bedroom door. The raven was perched there. Waiting. Draining Ryleth was the only way then.

“Thank you, Ryleth,” he whispered.

Finn lifted up his right hand and slowly lowered it onto her chest again. He felt her breathing. Her heartbeat. The whoosh of blood in her veins. And there was something else. A glow. Her life force. Her magic. His mouth watered.

Pray, let me not hurt her. If you are a god help me control myself, he sent the last to the raven who simply picked at its feathers impatiently.

He saw Ryleth’s strings of life as he had with the Ostil in Ryleth’s village. He had tried to reach the others in the forest by touching them like he had that one, but it had not worked. They had been too angry, maddened really, so they wouldn’t hear him, couldn’t hear him and destruction was all that could be done. He wasn’t trying to reach Ryleth, but he did touch the strands of blue light that came out to him and they turned *gold*. She let out a breath and her expression became almost joyous.

“That is *you*? I feel *you* in my soul!” she told him.

He smiled. But then his mouth filled with saliva again. He was so hungry. But he just needed enough strength to run, to hobble, to *crawl* to the Luminus.

He lightly gathered the blue strands of her life force in his hand and *pulled* as he had with Marikoth. But gently. Oh, so gently. Strength immediately began to fill him. He could stand straight. He drew in a deep breath as if emerging from water. Aches and pains melted away. The feeling of being empty receded, His skin began to tingle and… Ryleth's eyes were fluttering shut! He wrenched his hands off of her.

She staggered back, clutching her chest, and breathing heavily. The blue strands of her life force were dimmer. Much dimmer than when he had begun. He looked down at his hands, still reaching for her, still *wanting*, and felt a wave of revulsion flow through him. There was another *caw!* But it sounded like laughter. He scowled at the bird.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, Ryleth!"

She waved him off. "It's all right. I'll be fine. Now go! Go! Your Rohan needs you."

He didn't wait to see if she was lying that she was all right. After he helped Rohan he would come back to her. But now he had to fly.

The raven flew ahead of him out of the door and led him through the castle. He felt so good. Filled with power and purpose. But he was still hungry. A small part of him wanted more. And he worried that the desire for more would never go away, but just grow until it was all he was.

As he was running down one of the long hallways dotted with his ancestors' portraits and beautiful tapestries, a Fae in very fancy clothes stepped out of a doorway in front of him. The raven *cawed* angrily as it had to veer upwards to avoid him, not that the handsome Fae noticed, and Finn nearly bowled into him as well. Finn managed to halt his forward momentum at the last minute and hit the wall instead.

"Oh, dear! I do so apologize--oh, you're a *servant*. You need to watch where you are going!" The fancily-dressed Fae man growled, his tone changing remarkably when he saw Finn had no pointed ears or red eyes.

Anger flared in Finn's chest. His fingers curled against his palms. His voice was icy as he said, "I am Prince Finrael Ravenspar! Who am I addressing?"

The Fae blinked and took a step back. "Ah! You are the--the prince?"

"Must I repeat myself? Who are you? How dare you behave this way with a prince *or* a servant!" Finn growled. "I would have your name, sir, this instant!"

The Fae seemed to gather himself. He did a brief bow. "I am Lord Elidyr Paquen, one of your father's Councillors. I do apologize for my shortness, but the attack by the Ostils and your--your own defense of us has caused a great disturbance."

Finn grimaced. Of course, it had. His fighting the Ostils with Death Magic had likely caused more of a disturbance than the Ostils themselves. He should forgive Paquen's rudeness and move on because of that, let alone his need to warn Rohan about the undead.

"I'm sure. Well, I must go--"

"Wait! Where is your father? The Council has questions and, ah, *concerns*," Paquen said with a sweep of his arm.

"The Ostils have stopped attacking. Everyone is safe," Finn said, not adding, *at least in the Empire*. "My father has other matters to attend to."

Finn thought it unwise to tell this Paquen that his father was away from Aymar entirely.

"None so important as this!" Paquen stared hard at him.

"My father knows what the Empire needs," Finn answered.

"Lord Paquen! There you are! I wondered where you ran off to." A female Fae emerged from the same door as Paquen had. She was a handsome Fae, dressed in a more military manner than Paquen.

The moment she caught sight of Finn, her lips parted, and her eyes widened. Her steps stuttered a moment, but then she caught herself and performed a sweeping bow. "Prince Finrael, I am so honored to finally meet you."

"Ah, thank you, and you are?" Finn shifted from foot to foot. He had to go!

The raven was flying in a circle, waiting for him, up ahead.

"Oh, forgive me, I am Lady Finnea Beinelis! One of your father's Councillors and one of his oldest friends," Beinelis answered. Her forehead furrowed. "I am so glad to see you up. Your father said you were very ill after the attack. He left me in charge because of it."

Finn blanched. "I am quite well now. But I have something I must do. Could you--you hold down the fort while I do it?"

She blinked, but then smiled broadly. "Of course! We should speak later when you're--"

"Yes, we will! I must go!" Finn waved at her as he was already running down the hall.

He heard Paquen say, "*You*, in charge? Or that Death Mage? The Council won't hear of it! There will be repercussions!"

Finn tucked that conversation in the back of his mind. This Lord Paquen seemed like trouble. But he let it go for now. Soon the stairs up to the tower appeared. The raven soared upwards. He took the steps two at a time. The door to the Luminus room was as he had left it. He shouldered it fully open and practically threw himself at the magical device.

His hands curled around the edge of the wooden stand. There was that familiar sickening lurch and Finn swallowed the bile that was rising in his throat. Rohan's rooms swam into focus. Finn's eyes flickered all over the image looking for Rohan or someone who could get the king.

"Rohan? ROHAN!" Finn shouted. "Rohan, please! You're in danger!"

He saw a flash of a figure in the doorway that led into Rohan's bedroom.

"ROHAN?!"

"Finn?"

Rohan walked out of the bedroom. He wore a pair of dark red silk pants and a matching silk robe. His hair was still tousled with sleep. A smile was curling his lips until he saw Finn's expression.

"Finn? What is it?" Rohan asked. "Your hair… What happened? Are you all right?"

"The undead are in Reave Castle!" Finn cried. His knuckles went white as he clutched the Luminus.

"What? Where?" Rohan's eyes darted around his room, but then they focused on Finn.

"They're coming up from the catacombs. Christopher is--was--or will be attacked by them. I'm not sure if it happened or is happening or will happen. But the undead are *there*," Finn said.

To Rohan's credit, he didn't ask how Finn knew. Instead he sprinted to the door of his suite of rooms. Finn heard him call for his servants. He commanded them to get Serxio and Leonid and send the Guard to the catacombs. Then he was back.

"I don't know how you knew this, Finn, but thank you. I have to go--"

"Yes, but bring Lightbringer. Your magic…" He stopped. There was something in Rohan's expression that caught his attention. "What's wrong?"

"It doesn't matter. I will get Lightbringer." Rohan smiled.

"Your magic… Rohan, what's *wrong*?"

"I'm drained, Finn. But that's all right. The sword is powerful all on its own. Don't worry, my love," Rohan rattled out, lingering only on the endearment.

But Finn was too distressed by what Rohan was saying to focus on that. He would later, but not now.

“You need me to power you up,” Finn whispered.

“Tearlach believes I will power up again on my own, but slowly,” Rohan said.

“Tearlach…” Finn’s lips flattened. “You need me there.”

“Everything will be all right, Finn. I will return here to tell you what happens. Just stay where you are. All will be well,” Rohan assured him.

“But… All right. I will wait for you,” Finn said, feeling fear and disatisfaction all at once.

Rohan smiled. He kissed two of his fingers and pressed it to the globe of the Luminus. Finn responded in kind, but his heart was heavy.

“Return to me,” Finn stated.

“I will,” Rohan said.

Then Rohan disappeared into his bedroom. He emerged fully dressed with Lightbringer in one hand. The blade did not glow. Finn could feel how empty the sword was. It hungered just as he did.

This is wrong. I should be with him.

With a wave, Rohan strode out of the room and disappeared from sight again. Finn waited.

And waited.

And waited.

But Rohan did not return.

FIGHT WITH FIRE

As Rohan ran down the stairs, Serxio and Leonid were running up. They met in the middle. Both men looked frazzled, but neither appeared injured. Serxio was clutching his daggers and Leonid had his crossbow out. Rohan grimaced. Neither weapon had served them well in their first battle against the undead. They needed fire.

Are the undead really in the castle?

Rohan felt a stab of rage mixed with fear that Reave Castle had been thus violated. He wanted to deny that it was possible. The castle had offered safe haven for thousands of years in one form or another since the Aeturnals had laid its foundations. But now that safety might be gone. As hard as that was to take, he knew that it was true, because Finn had told him so. And he believed Finn with everything he was.

"My king!" The two men cried in unison.

"The undead are in the castle," Rohan explained, hefting his sword. The runes were unlit. The sword felt dead in his hands. A wave of dread went through him. He was just a man without Lightbringer. Just a man with a sharp bit of metal to stab at the darkness. He knew that wasn't enough to keep his people safe in these treacherous times. "Finn told me that Christopher was being attacked--"

"Yes, we know! We were coming to you when your man found us," Leonid explained.

"Is Christopher all right?" Rohan asked. His chest grew tight with the thought that Christopher might be injured or worse.

"He's surprisingly plucky. Tough as nails that one!" Leonid grunted. "He made it into the kitchen's larder. Shut the door on the undead to keep them below. They busted through that door, but the kitchen one's holding."

"And the other exits?" Rohan asked

His mind raced as he thought of every other entrance from the cellars into the castle. There were too many. The undead could be everywhere! But the castle seemed quiet. There were no screams. No running people. No low, guttural moans from undead throats.

"Christopher alerted us in time. I have Guards stationed at all the exits, but strangely, the undead are all clustered by the kitchen," Leonid answered. "They don't seem to be seeking another way out."

Rohan frowned. "They followed Christopher. Perhaps they do not have the intelligence to do anything other than track their prey. Remember that they remained where they were--swaying before the trees--until we approached them in the forest. I thought that there was something about the magical glade that held them there and that was why they did not go into town, but perhaps not."

"So they're dumb. Well, that's a relief! Can you imagine smart undead?" Serxio asked.

"I can, but I do not wish to. They do enough damage as slow and dim-witted as they are," Rohan admitted.

"It's their numbers and the fact that they don't feel pain even at the loss of a limb that makes them so dangerous," Leonid pointed out.

"Cutting off their legs was a good first move." Serxio made slashing movements with his daggers.

Leonid put a hand over Serxio's arms to still them. "Whoa there, Stabby Mcstabs-A-Lot. There's no undead on this stairwell."

"I'm just warming up! For the battle! There will be a battle, won't there?" Serxio asked.

"Of course, Serxio," Rohan said.

"And we'll be in the thick of it as always." Leonid gave Rohan a hard look.

But Rohan was unrepentant. Maybe some kings let others do their fighting for them, but not him. He wondered where Tearlach was and if he should either warn the Achuvien king of the danger or simply ask him if he wanted to send the undead all the way to their next life.

"How did Finn know about all of this though?" Serxio asked.

"I'm not sure. He just appeared in the Luminus looking frantic. It didn't seem wise to stay and ask questions," Rohan said. "But I'm sure he'll explain everything to us as soon as we deal with this."

"And I'm sure it'll be a story!" Leonid exclaimed.

"Indeed. But first, we need to speak to Christopher and find out how many there are and where they are coming from. Where is Christopher now?" Rohan asked, worried about the brave young alchemist.

"He's doing something clever with alcohol in the kitchen," Serxio said. "Surprisingly, he's not drinking it. I would be drinking it."

"He's cool under pressure, that one. I bet he has a plan already," Rohan said as he urged the men back down the stairs.

The three hustled to the kitchen. Rohan could hear the undead pounding on the door before they entered the room that smelled of yeasty bread and roasted meat. A knot of Guard crouched by the door that led down to the larder. The Guard had their shields out, swords drawn, and their faces were as pale as milk as the heavy wooden door *shuddered* under the force of undead hands pounding on it. Dust rained down onto the ground. The door was holding, but for how long?

"I estimate we have about a quarter hour before they break through based upon the thickness of the last door they destroyed, King Rohan," Christopher said, guessing his concern. "Have the others told you about our unwelcome guests?"

Cook Shelton and Hannah were helping Christopher fill glass bottles with the raw alcohol that the Guard often drank. It was no fancy wine, but instead stuff that burned the throat on its way down. The young alchemist had stuffed sections of cloth into each bottle.

He lifted his head as Rohan and the others drew near to survey them before focusing once more on the bottles. Blood had coursed down his face from a cut along his temple, but the blood had dried, giving him an almost war-painted look.

"Finn told me about them," Rohan said. He held up a hand and cut off the questions with, "I don't know how he knew. Likely magic. But I do need to understand what *you* know, Christopher. Did you see where the undead came from?"

Christopher grimaced, but then squared his shoulders as if he were used to getting bad reactions to bad news. He kept working though. "They came from your family's crypt."

Rohan's tongue clove to the top of his mouth for a moment. He swallowed. "My family… there

are countless generations down there."

Including my parents...

"I think there is more than just your family in the horde I faced. They looked too *fresh*," Christopher grimaced again as his hands moved at lightning speed to stuff the alcohol-filled bottles with rags.

"Ah." Rohan found himself speechless at this description. "The crypt leads to secret passages out of the castle. Marikoth must have found them."

"But, as you said, King Rohan, the undead are not that smart," Leonid said.

"So Marikoth just wound them up and sent them down a tunnel?" Serxio asked.

"I think there might be someone closer to us than Marikoth responsible for this," Christopher said as he took more filled jars from Hannah.

"Who?" Rohan frowned.

"Tearlach. I found him by the crypt's entrance," Christopher explained. "He claimed he was checking on the dead, but the gate was closed. Yet when I checked moments later it was open and the undead were there."

"Tearlach." Rohan's eyes narrowed.

"Didn't he say that Marikoth worked for him as Court Magician?" Serxio asked.

"Until Marikoth supposedly betrayed him," Leonid growled.

"Where is Tearlach now?" Rohan asked.

"In his chambers last I checked," Serxio said.

"He will need to answer for this if he is behind it," Rohan growled. "Leonid, send the Guard to get him and hold him. He is not to be harmed, but he is to be kept from doing any more mischief. I will deal with him after the immediate threat is handled."

"Right ho!" Leonid raced from the kitchen, his voice lifting as he shouted orders.

There was another bone-shuddering jolt against the kitchen door. The Guards' swords rattled in fear against their shields. Both of which would be practically useless in a fight against the undead.

Rohan turned back and watched as Hannah handed Christopher another filled glass jar. Her lips were in a tight white line and her eyes flickered to the door, but she kept on at her duties. Rohan was both immeasurably proud of her and incredibly sad. She was too young to have experienced so much terror, pain and loss. If he could not keep the children of his kingdom from suffering under his rule, he feared he was not much of a king at all.

"Hannah, I don't think you should be here right now," Rohan said gently. "Cook Shelton--"

"But I'm helping!" Hannah was pale, but bright spots of color erupted on her cheeks as she cried out. "I'm helping, aren't I, Christopher?"

"Yes, you are. She is," Christopher said as he gestured towards the dozens of glass containers on the counter. "My understanding is that burning the undead is the only way to truly destroy them, yes?"

"Yes." Rohan lifted up one of the glass jars.

"These will help with that. Light the wick and throw it at them. The glass will break and alcohol will cover the undead and everything near them, setting all on fire and creating a barrier for any behind them," Christopher explained.

"Fire. In a building. That doesn't sound wonderful," Serxio protested.

"The castle is mostly stone. We'll just have to be careful," Rohan said. "This is brilliant."

"If I had more time I would think of something else," Christopher said. "But this is what we have."

"It's quite good!" Serxio assured Christopher who blinked a few times as if unused to

compliments.

"Ah, quite. Now, I think the best attack would be from behind the horde," Christopher said, his cheeks flushing. "I take it that you're going to be in the lead, King Rohan."

"The king should not be in the lead," Leonid stated as he marched back into the kitchen. "He should be kept *safe*. But we all know that my thoughts on the matter will be ignored."

"In this small matter, yes, Leonid." Rohan's lips twitched into a smile. "I will be front and center where a *king* should be to keep his people safe. Did you send the Guard to deal with Tearlach?"

"It is a day for meeting people coming to look for me already! His warriors were shouting and accusing us of poisoning them," Leonid said. "As far as I can get out of them, Tearlach is unconscious in his rooms while they were also knocked out. They claim they were poisoned by last night's meal."

"They were *not*! I saw to that myself!" Serxio scoffed.

"And I cooked it!" Cook Shelton blazed. "It was perfectly fine!"

"And I saw Tearlach not half an hour ago," Christopher reminded them.

But Rohan grimaced. "You saw someone that *looked* like Tearlach."

"Meaning it could have been Marikoth?" Leonid asked.

"Yes." Rohan nodded.

Serxio flapped his arms in alarm. "You do realize then that Marikoth could look like anyone! He let the undead in the castle! He could still be here! He could still be here disguised as--as Cook Shelton!"

Everyone's gaze swung to Cook Shelton. Her eyes went wide and she put a hand against her ample bosom.

"No false Cook Shelton could make a breakfast sandwich like I did for this young man this morning!" she insisted.

They all looked uncomfortable and felt foolish.

"We don't really think you're Marikoth," Rohan assured her. "It's just the idea that--"

"Marikoth is--is the Glowing Man?" Hannah guessed.

"Yes," Rohan said reluctantly.

"So he could be anyone?" Hannah asked and shuddered.

He patted her back. "It will be all right. We will defeat him."

But even as Rohan said that, he wasn't sure how. If Serxio was right then the Fae Death Mage could look like anyone. He could simply hide amongst them until he chose to strike and they wouldn't know he was near until that last, terrible moment. He put a hand on Lightbringer's hilt. The sword was still and silent. If it had been energized, he bet it would have helped him sense Marikoth. But it was not and a wish was just a wish.

There was another shuddering bang on the door. Rohan narrowed his eyes.

"Are we ready to take on the undead?" he asked his companions.

"Always!" Leonid nodded.

"I'm with you to the end. Hopefully, the end won't be anytime soon," Serxio added.

"I will join you in this," Christopher said as he handed a satchel full of the fiery cocktails to Rohan. "I would ask, if at all possible, that we keep one or two alive. Well, not alive, *per se*, but as they are."

"Keep the undead *undead*?" Serxio suggested.

"Something like that. I want to experiment on them," Christopher answered. Everyone paled and he looked a little embarrassed. "I know it sounds gruesome, but the only way we are to understand what's been done to them is to experiment upon them. Their sacrifice will save others."

"We understand, Christopher." Rohan clapped his shoulder. "You are just a rare being that can speak so plainly about such things."

"I've always been this way." Christopher shrugged and then said more softly, "Most people find it disturbing, but I am doing this to help stop it from happening to others."

"We understand. You're a scientist!" Serxio nodded vigorously.

"That is my goal." Christopher bowed his head.

"You're quite the brave one, Christopher," Leonid remarked as he slung the satchel across his shoulders and took out one of the glass bottles, weighing it in his hand. "Maybe you would be good in the Guard."

"I don't respond well to authority," Christopher answered without any mirth.

Hannah struggled to lift a satchel for Serxio. He took it from her with a smile and patted her on the head. Cook Shelton handed out torches for each of them, having lit them from the kitchen fire.

"Shall we?" Leonid asked.

"We shall. This way. As Christopher suggested, I say we come up behind them," Rohan said. "Cook Shelton, you take Hannah and get someplace safe."

He didn't tell her where to go as he wasn't sure where safety lay at that moment. But she nodded and put her hands protectively on Hannah's shoulders as the four of them turned and headed out again. They backtracked to the stairs where he had first met Serxio and Leonid, but this time they headed down. They threaded their way through the Guard who bristled with weapons.

Their feet echoed on the stone steps. Rohan gestured for them to lighten their tread and move softly. He kept his ears pricked for any other sounds of the undead. But there was only a sepulchral silence. They paused just outside of Christopher's laboratory. The young alchemist glanced inside, clearly checking to see if anything was disturbed.

"Doesn't look like the undead are interested in your potions," Leonid said and jostled Christopher's shoulder playfully.

"Indeed," Christopher said, but there was a sort of reverence in his gaze upon the room that had held nothing but cobwebs and dust before he'd come. Now it was a place where a young man's dreams were coming true.

They walked down the pale stone hallway with the arched ceiling. Ahead of them were the steps down to the crypt. Rohan drew in a sharp breath and swallowed the dry, bitter taste in his mouth. But the stairs were empty now. There were none of his relatives shambling up the steps mindlessly.

"That's where I saw Tearlach… or the person pretending to be him," Christopher said, "and then the undead."

Rohan stopped at the top of the steps and a cold wind blew up and coated his face. The smell was *wrong*. He went to the crypt at least once a year to honor his parents and it had never smelled like this rotten sweetness mixed with meat left too long in the sun. He would have to go down there after this battle to see what had been damaged.

What if he went down and found his parents' bodies gone? What if during the battle he recognized their faces? He swallowed down the dread and sadness as he reminded himself that what remained behind was not them. Their souls had gone back into the river of life and would be reborn again some day.

It was then that he heard the faint pounding and the underlying growling hum of the undead. Sounds that were not words, that were not language, just base cries of hunger. Rohan pulled himself away from the crypt and gestured for the others to follow him.

They crept down the hall towards the larder's door. He imagined Christopher running this way on

his own and thought how self-possessed the young alchemist seemed now. Though, Christopher was gripping the torch hard enough to turn his knuckles white.

Brave. Not stupid.

"I hear them," Leonid growled.

"I *smell* them." Serxio wrinkled his nose.

"Let's get ready." Rohan sheathed Lightbringer and replaced it with one of the glass bottles filled with alcohol. The sword wouldn't be as useful.

Not dead like it is.

"Remember, I want at least one to examine," Christopher whispered.

"We'll do our best," Rohan said.

He rolled his shoulders back and told himself that his well of magical power would refill. Slowly. But the truth was, without Finn, he wondered how slowly that would be. Too slowly to fight Marikoth? Leonid put his crossbow away as well. But Serxio was still trying to hold onto his daggers, the torch and an alcohol-filled bottle.

"You're going to drop something if you try to hold onto all of that, Serxio," Leonid hissed.

Serxio moaned, "But I need my daggers and the fire and the--"

"Quiet." Rohan lifted up a hand that silenced his two friends.

The door to the larder was before them and so were the backs of the undead. They were swaying. Moaning. They must have been stuffed inside of the larder like a can of sardines. The splinters of the doors to the larder were half in the hallway and the rest of it must have been stomped under foot.

"Oh, they really *smell*," Serxio groaned and he dropped his daggers with a clatter on the floor. "Damn."

The undead heard that. The last one that was trying to walk forward into the backs of his fellows turned around in this wide yawning way to face them.

"Is that--that a relative?" Serxio squeaked.

"No… too *fresh*," Rohan said using Christopher's description. "And there are too many."

"More missing farmers and townsfolk," Leonid said.

"Should we let them get into the hallway? Or take out the larder with them?" Christopher asked.

"We've got them trapped, mostly. They burn quickly," Rohan said.

Rohan lit the tail of the cloth in the bottle. It flared golden bright. He looked up at the undead. Three of them were trying to get through the doorways at the same time. The others were pushing behind them, arms outstretched, eyes missing, jaws gone on some, rot plumping stomachs on others, and, finally, some only bone and dried sinew. Those last ones could have been his relatives, but he didn't linger on that as he threw the first bottle.

Just like Christopher had said it would, the flaming bottle broke and the alcohol soaked the undead flesh. The flames followed the liquid, lighting the creatures up like torches. But they didn't disintegrate as quickly as they had in the woods. They kept walking towards them, flaming arms outstretched, moaning with need, if not pain.

"We've got to keep them from overrunning us!" Rohan cried.

He unsheathed Lightbringer and used the blade to chop through flaming legs. The undead toppled to the ground, legs cut or broken, but continued to crawl towards them. Another of the alcoholic flaming cocktails was thrown into the mass of undead. It burst, spraying alcohol everywhere that lit eagerly. The undead got in each other's way as they tried, with disturbing eagerness, to get to Rohan and the others. A mindless desire to destroy.

Rohan dodged flaming bottles as he darted forward and chopped off limbs to slow the undead's

movements. Soon there was a pile of flaming corpses chest high that was blocking the hallway and holding the other undead back. But the danger was still high as the undead continued to press forward in their vain quest.

Christopher got too close to the flaming pile and a bony hand wrapped around his ankle. He yelled in surprise and tried to twist away, but he managed just to pull the flaming undead out from under the others. It began to pluck at Christopher's legs and chest. Serxio put his daggers to good use as he hacked off the plucking fingers and pulled the young alchemist to safety. Christopher thanked him profusely, which had Serxio blushing.

"Oh, well, all in a day's work--ah! Get away from me, undead thing! Stab! STAB!" Serxio spun around towards the still crawling undead and stabbed it until the limbs came apart and burned away.

Leonid once waded in too deeply to send another flaming cocktail into the larder. The undead surged around him like a wave and nearly buried him under a pile of burning flesh. Rohan dove in and grabbed him around the waist before wrenching him away from them. The undead collapsed in a flaming pile where Leonid had just been.

"Thank you, my king! That could have been me under there!" Leonid gasped.

Rohan slapped his back. "Almost done now. There are only a few left and Christopher wants his subjects."

The pile of the undead dissipated quickly and turned to ash that drifted away. It left the hallway free of obstacles for them to get into the larder where the last undead were still. There were half a dozen of them. Two men and four women. Their flesh was bloated and there were places where it was black from decay. The smell was unbelievable. They were swaying as they walked unsteadily towards him between the shelves of dried goods. As dear as food was at this point, Rohan was not sure if any of this should be used again.

It should be burned. Just like them.

"How do you want to handle this, my king?" Leonid asked as he joined Rohan by the door.

"Take four of them out with the torches and then… Well, how do we trap the other two?" Rohan wondered out loud.

"There's a gated area in my lab. Looks like they stored expensive wine or port there," Christopher offered. "We can trap them inside it and hold them there."

"They seem to avoid the fire if they can help it. Maybe we can use the torches to drive them into the gated section?" Rohan suggested.

"Sounds like a plan!" Leonid agreed.

Rohan and Leonid surged into the larder. The two of them worked together to burn the undead even as they tried to totter away from him and his Guard Captain. Three went down with groans and flailing arms that knocked bags of rice and dried herbs from shelves. That left three undead standing. One lurched forward unexpectedly and threw her rotting arms around Rohan's chest. He let out a cry of disgust as much as shock. He tried to shake her off, but she clung to him like a strangling vine, pinning his arms to his chest, making it impossible to slash at her with Lightbringer or set her on fire with the torch.

"Get off of him!" Leonid cried.

Leonid was suddenly trying to rip her off. Rohan heard a sickening, wet sound as the rotting flesh pulled off the woman's arm into Leonid's hands. Her arm had been desleeved of flesh. Leonid let out a cry of disgust and threw the flesh down onto the ground with a *splat*! Rohan did not wait for Leonid to try again as he felt the woman's teeth at the back of his neck. Instead, he threw himself backwards against one of the shelves so hard that the shelf toppled over as did he and the undead woman. He

landed on top of her and the shelf. In surprise, she loosened her grip slightly. He was able to leap up from her rotting embrace. He twisted around and set her on fire with the torch.

That left only the two that Christopher wanted to study. Waving the torches at the undeads' chests, he and Leonid drove the things out of the larder. Serxio and Christopher joined in as they forced the undead down the hallways that led to the laboratory. The undead practically ran into the gated area to avoid the flames. Christopher shut the gate after them and clicked an old lock shut. The undead moaned and swayed, but stayed away from the bars.

"We did it!" Serxio cried.

"We did indeed!" Rohan grinned.

"I have that dead woman's flesh underneath my nails," Leonid grimaced.

"Considering what else you have under there, it might be an improvement," Serxio remarked.

Leonid narrowed his eyes at Serxio who shrugged, unrepentant.

"What? If you weren't seemingly *allergic* to bathwater I wouldn't have anything to say," Serxio pointed out.

"I *work*, unlike some people who prance their way through life," Leonid began.

"Gentlemen, we've just had a *victory*, let's celebrate it, shall we?" Rohan suggested.

His two friends nodded. Reluctantly. Winding each other up was their favorite pastime after all.

"I should make far more progress now that I have these subjects," Christopher said with satisfaction. He had his hands on his hips and was gazing at the undead almost lovingly.

"I'm so glad you're on our side, Christopher," Serxio remarked with a little shudder.

"Whatever you need for your work, let us know," Rohan said to the young alchemist.

Christopher nodded though his gaze did not leave his subjects. "I appreciate that. I will reward your trust in me."

"I should let the Guard know that the undead problem is dealt with," Leonid said.

Rohan nodded. "And we need to speak with Tearlach to get to the bottom of whether he has betrayed us or was really poisoned, but first…" He paused and his lips pressed together. "I need to go down into the crypt and see… see what damage has been done."

"Oh," Serxio said softly, "your parents."

"Yes, I did not see any undead who looked like them, but it has been years since…" He broke off and shook his head. "I need to look in the crypt and find out if they were used by Marikoth."

"Shall we come with you, my king?" Leonid asked. "We need to find out how the undead got into the castle in the first place and block that off."

"You're right at that. But alert the Guard first and meet me in the crypt, Leonid." He turned to Christopher and Serxio. "Christopher, go ahead and proceed with your work. Serxio, come with me."

All nodded in agreement. Leonid jogged ahead of them while he and Serxio walked to the top of the steps of the crypt. He and Serxio lingered at the top. Now that he was there, Rohan wanted nothing more than to keep walking. He wasn't sure what he would feel or do if he found his parents' sarcophagus empty. But he had to know either way. He took a deep breath and went down the first step. Serxio began to follow him, but he held up a hand.

"Could you wait just a little while? I will call you when I need you, Serxio," Rohan said softly.

Understanding flooded the lord's features. "Of course, my king. I'll be right here if you need me."

"Thank you, Serxio."

Rohan then turned back and went down the few steps to his family's crypt. The metal gate was open as Christopher had described. The scent of rotting flesh still lingered in the air and he grimaced. He pushed the gate fully open and stepped inside.

The crypt was lit with bluish-white crystals that burned forever without any smoke. They cast the barrel-ceiling chamber in a ghostly light. The white stone of the walls, floor, ceiling and sarcophagi seemed to glow. The room was long and rectangular, leading to a further set of steps to other chambers further in and, evidently, to some way outside of Reave Castle. This was part of the Aeturnal's original construction and Rohan thought he felt a *resonance* here. Was it because he now knew he was the heir or was it because his magic was now triggered? He didn't know.

His parents' sarcophagus--they were buried together--was in the second room. So far he didn't see any of the mummified figures in the niches disturbed. And other than the smell, he would not have known anything amiss had happened here. Perhaps Marikoth had confined his undead-making to the poor villagers and not worked with the tough, dried flesh of the long undead.

He went down another set of steps into the second room where his parents were. But it was not their disturbed sarcophagus that caused him to freeze in place before reaching for Lightbringer. No, it was not the undead at all.

"Hello, Rohan," Marikoth said with a slow smile alighting his evilly handsome face, "I was waiting for you. What took you so long?"

AN OFFER

Finn stared hard at the Luminus waiting to catch even a glimpse of movement in Rohan's quarters, but there was none. No movement. No Rohan. No Guard even to tell him the status of the fight against the undead, and, more importantly, that Rohan, his friends and his stepbrother were all right.

How long has it been in Rirea? Thirty minutes? An hour? Longer? It feels like it's been forever here.

Finn's right hand crept up to the Eye of the Raven pendant around his neck. It was cool against his palm. He could feel the magic in it. A surprisingly sturdy, but thin thread of purple light that came from the center of the pendant. He could almost understand the enchantment, but then his vision flickered, going dark for a moment, before the world resolved around him again.

"Rohan?" Finn leaned forward until his nose was practically pressed against the glass ball of the Luminus.

No response. No movement. Just a section of Rohan's rooms could be seen. A slice of carpet. A corner of a bookcase. The edge of a table. A sliver of a window. It was almost maddening to think how much he wasn't seeing of that space. He wondered if he would ever get a chance to see beyond what the Luminus showed him now or would he never get back to Rirea? A momentary terror went through him as he considered how fast the years could flow in Rirea while time ambled by in the Empire. If Rohan was not immortal like he was, he would die maybe before Finn convinced his father to relent. Maybe that was what Thalanil was counting on.

He knew of all of the things that could go on in Rirea that this was the most selfish to fear, but he couldn't help thinking of the fact that the longer they were apart the greater the chance that Rohan would forget him and move on to someone who could share his life fully. While his memory and love for Rohan would remain fresh and clear, Rohan's would fade and he would eventually turn away. Maybe like Finn's mother, Rohan would put the Luminus in some dusty attic room and cover it with a sheet. His hand tightened on the pendant.

The darkness came again. Finn felt like he was being sucked into it, swallowed down, and falling, falling, falling! He gasped as the falling abruptly stopped and he was standing. Or was it him? No, this *wasn't* his body! Like in the death dream with Marikoth where he was able to connect with Rohan as he faced off against Ryleth after the death of Hex, Finn, once more, was seeing and hearing through Rohan's eyes and ears.

Rohan? ROHAN?!

The Rirean king did not appear to hear him.

Is he all right? Is he in danger? What is happening?

Finn sucked in a cold breath as he saw that Rohan was surrounded by sarcophagi! They were white and illuminated by eerie blue-white light. At first, this space looked Fae to him somehow, but there were statues lying on top of the sarcophagi, dressed in flowing white garments of marble. They were human. This was a very fancy human tomb.

The Rirean royal family crypt! Finn guessed.

He scoured his mind for any scrap of information on where the crypt was. He thought he had heard it lay beneath Reave Castle in the very lower levels. There were rumors that this part of the castle had been built by Fae, but though it was a fact, people had avoided saying it because having anything to do with the Fae was considered shameful.

But Rohan was never ashamed of his Fae heritage or mine. That was all his Uncle Hugues.

"Hello, Rohan," Marikoth's voice rose up before the Rirean king. "I was waiting for you. What took you so long?"

Finn gasped as he saw Marikoth. There! In Rirea! The Fae was dressed in deathly white from his hair to his boots. His white robes looked more bone-like than pure. His red eyes were the only real color about him and they glowed like embers.

No! Rohan, get out of there! Get away from him! Finn sent, but there was no reply or any sense that Rohan heard him. Like last time, Finn was only an observer and not an actor in this.

"I was dealing with your undead," Rohan answered coolly, seemingly unafraid, even as his hand tightened around Lightbringer's hilt.

"They weren't my best work, but I just wanted to get your attention," Marikoth purred.

Is he lying or did he send them just to lure Rohan to him?

But while Finn's body was as taut as a bow, Rohan's seemed looser somehow. That was likely good. Loose muscles meant greater ease of movement to swing a sword or run like Hell.

"You have it. What do you want, Marikoth?" Rohan asked.

It doesn't matter what he wants! It's going to be bad. He can't help himself. Get out of there, Rohan!

Marikoth shifted, putting one booted foot over the other, crossing them at the ankles in a languid, almost sensual movement. Finn ground his teeth at it. Marikoth was likely *hungry* but not for sex.

"To be a part of your little conclave." Marikoth waved one hand through the air.

Finn found himself interested in spite of himself and his own advice to Rohan to not listen and simply flee as he wondered, *Conclave? Oh, he means the meeting with the nearby royals! But why would Marikoth want to be part of that? And why would he think Rohan would welcome him?*

"That conclave is about *you*, Marikoth. What we're going to do about you," Rohan growled.

That smile on Marikoth's face became more cat-like. "Well, that's *more* reason to have me there! Then we can decide together!"

"If you're *there*, Marikoth, it will only be as a *sheath* for Lightbringer." Rohan's eyes narrowed.

"You're so bold and brave and heroic! What must it be like to always be so upright and dashing?" Marikoth laughed as though he was truly enjoying this repartee.

"What must it be like to turn innocent men, women and children into the undead and send them after their fellow citizens?" Rohan asked back.

Marikoth tapped his chin as if considering this question. "Well, it can be quite satisfying actually to accomplish great magic!"

"At the cost of hundreds of lives?" Rohan's voice cracked with anger.

Marikoth focused those red eyes upon him and a smile played around his lips. "Ah! Yes, you don't believe in sacrificing people. You want to save them. Which is good! I suppose. But it's all the more

reason you need to listen to my offer and allow me at your conclave."

"Offer? The only offer I will be entertaining from you is one in which you stop draining my lands and harming my people and--"

"I will!" Marikoth cut him off.

Rohan was silent. Had Marikoth offered to *stop* attacking Rirea?

"What's the price, Marikoth?" Rohan almost sounded weary as he asked it. "It's undoubtedly something I cannot pay."

"Oh, you *can* pay it."

"Then it is one that I will *not* pay."

They stared at one another for long, silent moments before Marikoth lightly laughed and crossed his legs the other way.

"It really does amuse me that you think you have a chance to defeat me, Rohan," Marikoth said. "I am much too powerful for you."

But I'm not, Finn thought and wished he could reach through Rohan to the other Death Mage.

He had drained Marikoth before. He could do it again. And this time, maybe he shouldn't stop. This time, maybe he should just keep going until there was nothing left except ash on the wind! He thought he heard the echo of bird-like laughter at that. It would be the one time he'd listen to the raven and drain someone.

"We'll see about that," Rohan answered stoutly. "Again, Marikoth, what do you want?"

"I want you to help me overthrow my dear brother," Marikoth answered.

Finn jerked. Did Marikoth still think that Rohan believed Thalanil had killed Rohan's parents or that the Wall was the cause of Rirea's problems?

"I have no quarrel with King Thalanil," Rohan stated simply.

"What? Truly? Now that's new. After all, don't you want to avenge your parents?" Marikoth taunted lightly.

"*You* were responsible for that," Rohan's voice was laced with pain.

"Yes, yes, I was. But it was only because they sought to *betray* me." Marikoth's red eyes flared with an angry, evil light. "You know how that is. Treachery. Don't you?"

I think he means Hugues! Finn realized. *Stop this, Marikoth!*

Finn could feel the burn of pain that caused Rohan. Hugues had raised Rohan like a son from what he could tell. What role had Hugues played in the broken allyship between Rohan's parents and Thalanil? Was Hugues still loyal to Marikoth? No, surely not!

"My parents realized what everyone always realizes about you, Marikoth. That you're foul and twisted and must be stopped," Rohan snarled and Lightbringer left its sheath with a *ring*.

"What an impressive sword! But something appears wrong with it!" Marikoth studied the blade that was inches from his throat with seemingly no concern.

Marikoth was right. There was something wrong with Lightbringer. Finn could see it too. The runes that normally glowed with power on the blade were completely out. There was not the faintest light coming from the sword.

Rohan is drained! He has no magic to tap into! Lightbringer, for all its power, is just a sword right now. That's not enough to harm Marikoth!

Cold sweat popped up on Finn's face. His hands shook even as Rohan's hands remained steady. Rohan was so brave even when he must know that he had no chance against the other Death Mage.

No, no, no, no, I can't lose him! I can't!

Marikoth put a finger on the tip of the blade and pushed it away from him with ease even as Rohan

struggled to fight against him. Finn could feel Rohan's muscles bunching as they strove to hold the sword straight, but couldn't.

"If I was here for a fight, Rohan, you would already be dead," Marikoth told him almost sweetly. "But I'm not. So let's put that away, shall we?"

"Thalanil is not my enemy!" Rohan grunted with effort, still trying to lift Lightbringer while Marikoth held it down with one finger.

"Perhaps not. But he is the cause of all of Rirea's suffering."

No, he isn't! Finn cried.

"The Wall is not--"

"The separation of the Empire and the kingdom is what is causing all your problems. All of *our* problems, actually," Marikoth said.

"What are you talking about?" Rohan spat.

"Rirea is on the verge of a death from which there is no resurrection, Rohan. You know that in your heart. And what's wrong here will *spread*," Marikoth said.

Finn felt Rohan's despair in that moment. When he'd made Tanglewood bloom, he'd sensed just how dire things were and they had not improved. But it was Marikoth's fault! He was draining the land of life! Yet the Death Mage was acting as something else was causing Rirea to fail.

"Destroying you will fix things!" Rohan snarled.

"Will it? You think that I am responsible for the sickness that spreads not just through your lands, but all of the old Aeturnal Empire?" Marikoth lifted an eyebrow.

"You're draining Rirea!" Rohan let Lightbringer fall to his side, chest heaving, sweat coating his upper lip.

"What I take is *nothing* compared to all the life there is. When one harvests wheat in the fall does that mean there will be no wheat the next fall? No! New seeds are sewn. The earth and the rain and the sun nurture them. Life begins anew," Marikoth pointed out. "But that's not what's happening in Rirea. The very land is poisoned and has become adverse to all life, creating monsters."

Rohan said nothing. That was true. The Lupine Woods seeped poison every time it rained. The poison twisted the few, hardy animal species that managed to live there. It tainted the land by the woods' edges and any crop grown there caused people to go slowly mad if eaten. From his own experiences using Death Magic, Finn knew that these things were not the result of simply draining life.

So is Marikoth truly not responsible for this? Finn felt a pit open up inside of him at the thought that restoring Rirea would not be so simple as destroying Marikoth and replacing drained life. But he thrust that thought away from him. Marikoth could not be trusted to tell the truth. *No! He's lying like he always does!*

"What is the cause then?" Rohan asked. "It can't be your brother's Wall. That's only been up during my lifetime and our problems preceded that."

"Indeed, they have! Problems on both sides of the Wall--Empire and kingdom alike--have existed since they were split apart," Marikoth claimed.

"Oh, and let me guess, the way to solve what ails the land is for it to be under one banner? Yours, I take it?" Rohan scoffed.

"*Ours*, actually." Marikoth smiled.

Finn was stunned by the words.

"*Ours*? You want to align our forces and what? *Marry*?" Rohan let out a choked laugh.

Marry? Marikoth and Rohan?! NO!

Marikoth seemed amused rather than affronted as he asked, "Oh, you think you couldn't fall in love with me? Become obsessed with me, Heir of House Aeturnal?"

"No, I could not."

"But Aeturnals and Death Mages are made for one another. Literally." Marikoth spread his arms to the side.

"You forget that there is *another* Death Mage alive and I *love* him," Rohan answered tightly.

Finn's heart leaped at the admission of love. But another part of him wanted Rohan to remain silent. If Marikoth believed that Rohan might agree to his insane plan then Rohan could get away.

"Oh, yes, my nephew!" Marikoth let out a sigh. "We'll get to him. But first, let me tell you a *story*."

There was a faint sound from behind Rohan. The Rirean king held himself unnaturally still and did not look back. Finn wondered if it was Leonid or Serxio. Surely, they had not left Rohan all on his own in the crypt!

"I know your little friends are upstairs, making a plan to save you, Rohan. But they won't. The only way you'll get out of here is when--or *if*--I want you to," Marikoth said with an airy wave of his hand.

He underestimates everyone. That is a weakness we need to exploit.

Marikoth caressed one of the white stone blocks on the wall that looked slightly different than the others. Finn recognized it as a Power Stone just before Marikoth began to tell his story, "Once upon a time, the Aeturnals and their Bonded Ones ruled an empire that flowed from sea to shining sea.

"The reign of these incredibly powerful rulers caused a time of unparalleled peace and prosperity. Art, culture, science, and magic all made leaps and bounds in terms of progress. It was such a remarkable time that the people worshipped their rulers instead of the gods. Because, after all, it was their rulers' great magics--Aeturnals and Bonded Ones working together--that were the cause of everyone's happiness. But the gods are jealous, spiteful creatures.

"And so there was a war between the Aeturnals and Bonded Ones against the very gods themselves. It lasted millennia with them keeping the gods at bay and protecting their people. But, in the end, they were betrayed by Ravenspars in the Bonded One's bloodline who were promised lands to rule in return for their perfidy.

"The Bonded Ones were cursed and, while their ability to manipulate life and turn it to power still remained, a great hunger grew within them. No longer did they drain life to create the great magics. They drained life, because if they did not, they would die a horrible, ravaging death. But the more they drained, the more their hunger grew until it was insatiable, and madness filled them."

Marikoth spread his hands wide and Finn saw how thin they looked. Was Marikoth starving even as he drained? Was he fighting against draining more because he knew that his hunger would only grow? Was he going mad? Finn had experienced the endless hunger in Marikoth and the drug-like dependency it had over him.

Finn thought of his own white hair and how like his uncle's it was becoming. He had only ever known physical hunger before this year. But ever since he had drained life he had felt the desire in him growing to drain more.

"The Aeturnals were cast out by their own people. They were harried to the ends of the earth. Unable to find peace. Unable to begin again. The few that survived were haunted by the empire they had lost, and the Bonded Ones that were severed from them until they, too, were no more," Marikoth continued softly. "Now, whenever a Bonded One is born, his first act of magic will be to drain his own mother to death. And then the hunger begins. The Aeturnals were thought to be all gone. Their

bloodline thin as water. Until *you*."

Rohan had listened to all of this in thoughtful silence. "A sad story, if true."

"You've been reading up on the Aeturnals and their Bonded Ones. Does this not comport with what you've found?" Marikoth asked.

Rohan frowned. "How do you know what I've been reading?"

"I know many things. So am I wrong?" Marikoth challenged.

"Stories in books are just stories. History is written by the victors. But say it is true, Finn is a Death Mage. I am the Heir to House Aeturnal. We love one another. Where do you come in?" Rohan asked.

Marikoth held up a finger. "I'm getting to that."

"Get there faster."

Marikoth pursed his lips, appearing slightly annoyed for the first time. "The gods in their jealousy did not truly understand--or perhaps did not remember--that the Aeturnals and their Bonded Ones were necessary to keep balance in the land." He lifted up his hands as if they were a balance going one way then the next. "Life and death. Creation and destruction. Ravenspars like my brother simply feed the extra life that is in the Empire. And the more he feeds it, the greater it grows, strangling itself and going insane in the process."

Finn thought of the Ostils. Marikoth was not wrong about the effect, but the cause? A curse of the gods? But had not the raven claimed to be the God of Death and Finn its Chosen? Was there a God of Life and Rohan its Chosen?

Marikoth laid one of his long-fingered hands against one of those Power Stones again, stroking it almost lovingly. Did he know what it was? Probably. Did he realize that Rohan could fill them with a Death Mage's help? That, Finn wasn't so sure of. But he doubted that even if Marikoth knew about this ability that he would ever take it. Marikoth would never share the power he drained with someone else.

"The gods brought you and I into this world together, Rohan, because they now see the folly of what they've done. Without us, life will cease after a painful, terrible madness," Marikoth explained.

"So this requires us to *rule*? Why? If our magic works the way you say it does then we can restore balance without overthrowing your brother or starting a war," Rohan pointed out, even as Finn's stomach churned at the thought of Rohan and Marikoth working together.

"The Ravenspars--like my brother and father--betrayed us, Rohan. They rule lands we should. Why should they continue to do so?"

"They didn't betray us. People likely long dead or long out of power may have betrayed our ancestors, but not us," Rohan said.

"Speak for yourself," Marikoth sniffed.

Rohan grimaced. "I don't know what happened between you and your family, Marikoth, or if your exile was warranted, but your personal pain cannot be a reason to start a war."

"How generous of you to even *consider* that I was wronged." Marikoth narrowed his eyes at Rohan, but then suddenly shook his head. "Regardless if I am owed my revenge, the entire Aeturnal Empire must be restored as one, Rohan. Everything must be as it was before the overthrow for the world to be balanced."

"Say I believe you, which I don't, but let's say I did. Why can I not have this empire with Finn?" Rohan asked.

For a moment, Finn imagined him and Rohan ruling the old Aeturnal Empire and restoring the glories of the past. His heart quickened. What a wonder that would be!

Marikoth's cat-like smile was back, but it did not reach his eyes as he explained, "Because to have such an empire, Thalanil would have to stop being king. Do you think he would step aside for you and Finn?"

Finn froze. His father wouldn't even let him *speak* to Rohan. He couldn't imagine his father actually stepping aside for them to marry and rule.

He wouldn't do it.

"No, he wouldn't," Marikoth said as if agreeing with Finn.

Finn's head snapped up. Could Marikoth hear him somehow? Did he know that Finn was there? Or was he simply answering his own question?

"If he can be convinced that the cause of the overgrowth and what's happening here was caused by this curse and ending it required what you say then--"

"He won't. Or, if he does, not until a very long time from now. And by then, Rohan, Rirea will be dead and all her people with her," Marikoth stated flatly. "You judge me for killing your people in my quest, but if you go down this road--if you refuse my offer--then it is *you* who is truly killing them."

"Finn would not let that happen. He would--"

"Overthrow his father?" Marikoth tipped back his head and let out a peal of laughter. He laughed so hard that tears exited his eyes. He had to lean against the nearest sarcophagus to recover himself. "Why is Finn not here now?"

"He…"

"Is it because Daddy told him no? Of course, it is," Marikoth mocked.

Finn's eyes blazed. He wasn't staying away from Rirea simply because his father said so! No, he was staying away because his father…

… threatened to hurt Rohan if I didn't.

That realization had Finn's thoughts coming to a screeching halt. But then he shook himself.

He thinks he's protecting me from a broken heart. He has no idea about the Aeturnals and their Bonded Ones. And I can't believe he wouldn't change his mind if he knew everything!

"Thalanil will *never* give you rulership over the Empire. I've discovered that he wouldn't marry Finn's mother because of my foolish people's prejudices against humans. And he loved her. Oh, how he loved her." Marikoth put a hand to his chest as if ashamed of said prejudices. "So you have no chance in his eyes. An Aeturnal? An Aeturnal with quite a bit of human blood? Ruling his Empire? Oh, no, absolutely not."

"And your solution is?"

"He must be *made* to give it up. He must be overthrown." Marikoth's voice deepened, as he said, "You wanted to know why Finn isn't the Death Mage for you? Because Finn would let your people *die* before he went against his father."

Finn felt the words like a blow. They weren't true! Except… were they?

"So Thalanil won't give up. Finn won't overthrow him and would try to stop anyone who would," Marikoth said. He thumped his chest. "I am the *only* Death Mage with the power and the will to do this. Only I can help you save Rirea. Not Finn."

Finn trembled with rage, but also fear. Marikoth was not altogether wrong. But Finn would not let Rirea die. He didn't agree that Thalanil could not be reached and persuaded. And he didn't know if his and Rohan ruling was necessary. That might just be something Marikoth was tacking on because he wanted it.

"You're not right about Finn," Rohan said. "You just assume because he doesn't expect the worst in everyone like you do that he's weak and won't do what he must. He just sees another way to do

things than you do."

"Oh, Rohan, I *wish* Finn's rosy view of the world was true!" Marikoth shook his head and his lush white hair flowed over his shoulders like a waterfall of white silk. "It would make what I have had to do unnecessary, but Finn is weak and he will never do what must be done. So I must."

Marikoth started to advance. Rohan stepped backwards. But then he held his place. To retreat would have shown weakness. Showing weakness to Marikoth was death. But Finn's own flesh crawled as Marikoth's cold breath ghosted over Rohan's lips. The desire to feed and sexual desire were hard to differentiate in Marikoth's red gaze.

"You are the Heir to House Aeturnal. You are meant to *serve* a Death Mage," Marikoth murmured. "I am the greatest Death Mage there ever was or will be. I am the true ruler of the Empire. Between us we can reunite the lands and restore balance."

Rohan grasped the wrist of Marikoth's hand whose fingers touched his chin. He pushed Marikoth back. The Death Mage seemed almost amused by this show of strength.

"I will *never* serve you, Marikoth. I am king already and Finn is the only one I want," Rohan breathed out.

And Lightbringer leaped up as if it had a life of its own. The blade was pressed to Marikoth's pale throat. The Death Mage's eyes dropped to the blade.

"Rohan, don't let your fancy for a *boy* defeat your duty to your people," Marikoth said. "I am the only way to save Rirea and the Empire. Through me balance will be restored."

"Ending you is my duty!"

Finn could feel the muscles and sinew in Rohan's whole body work as he strove to thrust his blade through Marikoth's throat. But only the thinnest line of crimson appeared. A mere scratch. No matter how much strength or power Rohan used, he could not move that blade.

Marikoth reached up and ran a pale fingertip through the blood on his throat. Rich as rubies. He licked his finger clean and smiled. Then he grasped Rohan's hand on Lightbringer's hilt. It was a light grasp. Something that Rohan should have been able to shake off. But instead, Rohan let out a shrill cry. Lightbringer fell from his suddenly nerveless hand and clattered on the stone floor.

Marikoth is draining him! He's taking Rohan's life!

Unlike Finn, who Marikoth had been unable to drain, Rohan seemed to have no such protection by being the Heir. Instead, Rohan sank to one knee. His breathing came in stentorious gasps. He went down on the other knee. Sweat poured down his face. His vision started going in and out, fading to black.

Marikoth's smile was the only thing in focus. That smile grew and grew. The white teeth behind the flushing pink lips looked sharp and pointed. More like fangs. Finn let out a silent scream even as Rohan held in the cries of agony that wanted to leave his throat. He would not give Marikoth that satisfaction.

No! No! NO! Let him go! Finn screamed.

But no one seemingly heard him.

Or that was what he thought.

"Finn? Finn, can you hear me, dearest nephew?" Marikoth murmured into Rohan's left ear.

Finn froze. Marikoth was talking to him! Marikoth knew he was experiencing this! But, of course, Marikoth had witnessed him do this before. He must have recognized that Finn would be drawn to Rohan in danger again.

"Yes, boy, I know you've been listening in this entire time. I could see you," Marikoth taunted. "Now, I think we need to have a face-to-face meeting, don't you? Because if you don't come here, I

will destroy everything and everyone you love. Don't delay."

The last thing he heard before his connection to Rohan was severed was Marikoth's cold, dark laughter.

Finn rocketed back from the Luminus. His arms pinwheeled. He was going to fall. At the last moment, he grabbed its wooden stand before he fell to the ground. It held him upright as the world spun. The raven squawked and flapped its wings in agitation.

"Rohan!" Finn screamed.

He could still feel the life leaving his beloved Rirean king. He clutched his chest. His heart hammered like a drum. He had to get to Rirea! And now! Marikoth did not make empty threats. Unless he got to Rohan's side quickly, the Rirean king would die. Serxio would die. Leonid would die. Christopher would die. And countless other innocents that got in Marikoth's way would die, too.

There was only one way he knew to get through the Wall without Thalanil and that was Tyreon. But where was the King of Wolves? In the garden? Or on the hunt to provide for his family? Finn didn't know. And those weren't all of the obstacles in front of him.

After he managed to find Tyreon, he'd need to convince the King of Wolves to take him through the Wall. And even if he managed to do all of that he'd still need to get to Reave Castle. He couldn't walk. That would take a day. By horse maybe half that time. Perhaps he could fly…

At least his father was not there to object. Contrary to Marikoth's belief, Finn would not have let Thalanil stop him from going to Rirea. But he loathed the idea that they might have come to blows over it.

Finn staggered to his feet, prepared to race to the garden first and see if Tyreon was in the little copse he'd met the King of Wolves' family in. But the moment he stood up straight the raven rose up from the Luminus and flapped wildly, catching his attention.

Silver Soul! The bird's voice that was and wasn't like his own cried. *She is the only way!*

"What are you talking about?" Finn asked the bird.

He knew who Silver Soul was. She was his grandmother's wyvern. But since her death, Silver Soul had allowed no one to ride her and she'd killed people who got close to her. Elion, the stable master, had chains keeping her within her lair or she would not only kill all the wyverns there, but attack the populace as well. The thought of releasing her sounded like madness to him.

She can get you through the Wall. For her, there is no Wall, the raven answered.

"She kills everyone who comes near her!" Finn recalled the feeling of being watched by the great wyvern queen. "And I don't think she likes me very much. I should get Tyreon--"

She is Rohan's only chance of survival. The bird had settled once more on the Luminus. *Do what you will, my Chosen. Reject my advice, if you wish.*

Finn knew immediately that to seek Tyreon was the wrong path. The raven did not speak unless it meant what it said. And this wasn't it urging him to drain life. No, this was it telling him that only one

path--a very dangerous, uncertain path--lay before him to succeed. Would he be too afraid to take it?

He could almost feel himself losing that moniker of Death's Chosen if he turned down this advice now. And though he cared nothing for titles, the raven had helped him time and time again. It would be foolish not to listen this time when so much was at stake. And Rohan's life was more important to him than any risk to himself in facing Silver Soul. There was also a trickle of excitement within him at the thought of facing down the wyvern queen. The moment he'd seen Silver Soul's flashing eyes in her lair, some part of him had known that she was his destiny.

One way or the other, he added.

"I know what to do," Finn said, swallowing hard.

The raven *cawed* and shot out of the room and out into the stairwell. Finn followed after it, keeping its tail feathers in sight as he climbed the circular staircase. He burst out onto the roof. The sound of the wyverns restlessly moving within their lairs that ringed the outside of the tower suddenly went silent. Elion, who had been mucking out Shadeheart's lair, turned in confusion to see what had silenced the normally noisy beasts.

They know what I'm here for, Finn realized. *Or did they see what I did to the Ostils?*

Elion saw him and his red eyes went wide. His knuckles went white, too, around the rake he carried. The stable master had *clearly* seen what Finn had done to the Ostils. From up here, Elion would have had a perfect view. But, to his credit, Elion set the rake against the wall, wiped his hands on his tunic and quickly approached Finn. He bowed low.

"My prince! How may I serve you today? Would you be wanting to ride Lightheart?" Elion asked.

"No, Elion, I… I need access to Silver Soul," Finn confessed.

His hands fisted at his sides when he heard the clack of claws in only *one* of the lairs. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her. She was mostly in shadow. The sunlight only showed a section of silver-scaled skin and a massive front claw. One of those claws tapped against the stone floor as if telling him he was keeping her waiting.

"What?" Elion's right hand rose and grabbed the collar of his own tunic. "N-no, my prince! Don't you remember what your father said? Silver Soul is not for anyone--"

"She can get through the Wall. She's the only chance I have of saving the man I love," Finn told Elion.

Elion blinked. "She can… get through the Wall?"

"Don't ask how I know this." Finn's eyes caught sight of the raven who was perched on top of Silver Soul's lair, fussing with its feathers. "But I do."

"Someone's--someone's in trouble in Rirea?" Elion clarified. "Is it--is it Ostils again?"

That was confirmation he had seen what Finn had done. Finn drew in a breath.

"No, there is another Death Mage there. He's attacked--attacked someone close to me. Only I can save him. Elion, I have no time. I need Silver Soul," Finn told him.

Elion's left hand reached for the keys at his waist. They were for the locks on the chains that barred Silver Soul's lair.

"If I let her out, you'll be dead. You won't get to your love," Elion said.

Finn smiled. "I am a Death Mage, Elion. You've seen a little of what I can do." One hand swept towards the burned and scarred forest. "Silver Soul may be mighty, but I will have her cooperation or I… I will ensure that she harms no one." He reached for Elion to physically assure him, but the stable master reared back and Finn quickly dropped his hand. He tried to hide his hurt. "I will keep you safe, Elion. I promise."

"I'm not worried about me! Your father--the king--I've never seen him so happy before you,"

Elion confessed. “He loves you like I’ve never seen him care for anyone. And you--you saved us from the Ostils. No matter what they say about Death Mages, you’re all right by me. So I don’t want you getting hurt!”

Finn smiled again. “I assure you that I won’t. But I also won’t make this your responsibility. I overcame you and took the keys.”

“But you didn’t--”

Finn barely brushed the blue-white threads of Elion’s life force before the stable master pitched into unconsciousness. Finn caught him as he collapsed and carried him over to the wall of Shadeheart’s empty lair. Making sure he was comfortable and unharmed, Finn took the keys from his belt and stood up to face Silver Soul.

The taste of Elion’s life fizzed on Finn’s tongue like the cold juices he liked. He felt guilty for enjoying it at all. But all thought of Elion’s life force left him and another deeper hunger emerged when he saw Silver Soul’s massive head, half in sun and half in shadow. His heart thudded heavily in his chest. Silver Soul’s jaws were cracked open, showing a frightening set of fangs. She made a low, throaty growl that continued on like the purr of a cat. There were frightened cries from the other wyverns’ lairs. He heard them all moving as far inside of them as they could. But he started towards Silver Soul.

Do you know why I’m here, Silver Soul? He asked her as he saw more blue-white strands emanating from her lair that he’d ever seen in his life. *I need your help to save people. To save Rohan. And while you might not find me worthy, he is worthy.*

While he’d had to be found worthy in the eyes of Shadeheart and Lightheart for them to let him ride on their backs, he wondered if that was enough for Silver Soul. Maybe she simply hated everyone after her queen was taken from her. And he was a Death Mage, just like Marikoth. Death Mages, above all people, would have earned her ire since Marikoth drained his own mother.

Her silver eyes tracked his every movement. She never blinked. The sharp crown of horns on her head became visible as she turned her head when he made it to the giant locks on the chains. His hands shook as he grasped the first lock and lifted the key. He felt a hot blast of breath on his skin. His head snapped towards the interior of the lair.

She was right *there*.

Not two inches from him. Her snout was practically pressed against the length of chains. They were suddenly pulled taut as she *pushed* against them, jaws slightly agape, silver eyes fixed upon him. The dry, ophidian odor flooded his nostrils. Finn didn’t dare breathe too deeply.

Silver Soul, Finn sent. *Please, Silver Soul, I need your help. I need to save Rohan. He is worthy of your help even if I am not.*

He very carefully touched some of the blue-white tendrils of light that streamed from her. With the Ostil in Ryleth’s abandoned village, when he’d touched those threads they had almost immediately gone gold as he’d communicated with the creature. He’d reached the angered, frightened creature and convinced it of his good intentions. But with the Ostils that had attacked the palace, though the tips of the threads had gone gold, they had just as quickly gone black with the creatures’ unceasing rage. What would happen with this wyvern?

For a moment, *nothing* happened except for Silver Soul’s nostrils flaring as she scented him. But then the strands went *green*. A bright, brilliant green of new shoots. The green of spring from his childhood, those first, early years where he had toddled after his mother in the vineyard.

You have your mother’s eyes, a silky female voice filled his mind.

Who… who said that? He cried.

Even though he knew who it was--*Silver Soul*--it was still shocking to hear such complete thoughts from someone not human or Fae. For when he had connected his mind with Shadeheart's, he had only received images in return and emotions that he could parse and understand. But this! This was amazing!

Silver Soul? He gaped.

Yes, child. Who else would be speaking to you in my voice? The wyvern appeared to smile, showing more of those dangerous teeth.

Finn's eyes involuntarily darted upwards towards the bird that fluffed its feathers. She saw where he was looking.

Ah, not even the God of Death would be so bold as to pretend to be me, she answered his unasked question.

A god wouldn't? Finn's eyebrows rose and suddenly he wondered if he was powerful enough to face her should she choose to attack him.

She chuckled. *You have the power, but not the will. For you are not poisoned as the other is.*

The other… you mean Marikoth? Finn realized. *That's who I need your help against! He's attacked Rohan and Rohan will die unless I get to Rirea and you are my only hope of getting through the Wall and making it in time--*

You wish to fly into a trap? She cut off his frantic statements.

I would do anything to save Rohan, Finn answered. *I love him. And I do not believe there is any other choice. If I do not go, he will die. If I try a slower way, he will die.*

Those silver eyes--unblinking--searched his face. He knew she was seeing deeper inside of him.

You mean what you say, she murmured. *Your honesty serves you well. But I do not see what concern of mine this all is even if this Rohan will die without my help. He is nothing to me.*

I realized that he is no concern of yours, Finn admitted. *If you were to do this, I would owe you something in return.*

Her eyes narrowed. *You wish to make a deal? You are more Fae than I thought despite those eyes.*

Finn wondered if she had known his mother. But he found he could not ask about Maeve Ashton now.

No, no deal. Just a promise that I will help you in any way I can if you help me, Finn answered.

What makes you think I need or want anything that you can provide? Her gaze was steady.

Finn found that he could see some broken threads. They had been connected to another. His grandmother. When she had died, the connection between herself and Silver Soul had been brutally snapped. The wyvern followed his gaze as if she, too, could see the broken threads.

She is gone. For now. The wyvern's gaze grew distant then sharpened as her eyes were upon him again. *I wonder what she would think of you so like and unlike her son.*

Perhaps I have nothing to offer. Perhaps all I can say is that I wish to stop Marikoth from harming anyone else, Finn said.

From harming another like my queen? There is no one like her left. Silver Soul shook her head and Finn thought she might withdraw back into the lair, uninterested.

From harming himself! Finn found himself saying though he had not intended to. But the story Marikoth had told resonated with Finn. What if his uncle had not begun this life as the twisted being he was now? Finn was almost certain he had not. The unceasing hunger had done this to him. *She would want him to stop harming himself. Your queen. His mother. My grandmother.*

Silver Soul studied him. The moments stretched and Finn tried not to think of how the minutes

passing here would mean time galloping in Rirea. How long did he have before Marikoth drank Rohan to death? Even though his uncle had claimed to want to work with Rohan to restore the lands, Finn didn't know if Marikoth had that kind of control.

What happens if by stopping him, you become him? Silver Soul asked.

The saliva dried up in Finn's mouth. Was what happened to his uncle going to happen to him?

If it does, I hope someone stops me, too, Finn said.

Hmmm, we will see if you hold to that, Silver Soul answered. *I will help you, Prince Finrael Ravenspar.*

Finn blinked rapidly, not certain he had heard her clearly. Seeing his confused expression, she laughed, which sounded rather like a dry rustling of scales.

Wyvern got your tongue? She teased.

Finn shook himself. *You'll do it? You'll fly me to Rirea even if I'm--*

*Not worthy?*She appeared to smile again, showing those fangs. *If you were not worthy, you would not have gotten this close to me.*

Oh! Thank you! Thank you! He felt almost delirious with relief. She had said yes! *Let me unlock these chains--*

There is no need, she said and simply pushed forward.

The chains *snapped* as if they were made of rotten, old tree branches and not of magical metal. Finn stumbled back as Silver Soul effortlessly left her lair. She was three times the size of Lightheart or Shadeheart. Her powerful body was clad in silver scales that looked like shining armor. She unfurled her wings and they reached from one side of the tower to the other. Finn blinked as she shook her horn-crowned head.

"You--you could have left your lair at any time!" Finn stated instead of asked.

The wyvern queen smiled. *But of course!*

"But Father and Elion thought that if you could get free that you would have attacked people," Finn pointed out.

And people think that because you are a Death Mage you will drain them dry, she pointed out. But then as if in acknowledgment to herself, if not to him, added, *But there was a time when perhaps I would have done as they feared.*

"And if I lose control I might take life, too," Finn agreed with her.

She looked at him curiously. *You are aware of yourself. We are dangerous beings, you and I.*

"Yes, but only when we choose to be," Finn said.

Then we are a pair. She offered him a front forelimb to climb up on so that he could get to her back. *Come. There is no time to waste. Let us save your Rohan.*

He eagerly clambered onto her back. Unlike Lightheart, he had to sit further forward so that he could wrap his legs around the base of her neck. Her back was too broad otherwise. He did not ask to saddle her or for reins. He knew this would offend her. So he held on *very* tight as her wings flapped once then twice and they were lifting off from the roof.

The sun shone down upon them like liquid gold. Finn felt the joy of flying again. To fly on Silver Soul was beyond anything he could have imagined. Despite her size and strength, she was seemingly keenly aware of him and somehow balanced her body so that even if he lightly held on he would not fall.

He saw the Wall not too far in the distance. The Lupine Woods were darkened shapes beyond it. There was no life there, and he needed to be completely powered up to face Marikoth. If he was going to take life, it had to be from this side of the Wall. Would Silver Soul be horrified by his need?

Would she dump him off of her and fly away?

Silver Soul, I need--

Life, yes. You are hungry. I am hungry too, she said.

Ah, well--

You eat first. I will eat after I take you to your Rohan, she answered. *There is much overgrowth there.* She indicated with her head towards a thick area of forest that looked to be choked with vines. *Will that satisfy you?*

He blinked. *Y-yes, thank you.*

She flew towards the spot swiftly. Finn stretched out his senses towards the forest's extra life, being very careful not to touch Silver Soul's life strands. The forest's life seemed to leap up to him. It filled him to the brim with power. He was almost sparking with it. A smile lit up his face. He would use this power to heal Rohan. The darkness lessened between the trees until he could see the ground between the trunks before he finally stopped draining. He fancied that he heard the trees sigh in relief.

That was not your imagination, child. All life here is being squeezed out, she said. *Things must change.*

Rohan and I want to help that change, Finn told her.

Fae find change hard, she answered as she banked towards the Wall.

I know, he admitted, thinking of Thalanil. Seeing the Wall fast approaching, he asked, *Can you get through it?*

He didn't know how he imagined her getting through the endless Wall. Sections disappeared for Tyreon. Would the same happen for her? Yet, as they got closer and closer, the Wall appeared as solid as ever.

Ah, Silver Soul, the Wall--

What Wall? She asked as they were suddenly through it.

He spun around to look behind them. The Wall was still there. But they had passed through it as though it had not been there at all.

How did you--that was--I can't believe… you're amazing, Silver Soul! Finn laughed.

Yes, I am, she preened a little bit. *Now, where is your Rohan?*

At Reave Castle. It's--

Ah, yes, I know the castle, she said.

Oh! Of course, you've been alive for some time.

I was old when it's foundation was being built by the Aeturnals, she answered.

They raced over the forest and were already at the edge of Dawnmore it seemed in less than a blink. People out in the streets pointed up at them with open mouths. He heard the faint cries of fear and awe that Silver Soul elicited.

Where can you land? The courtyard? Finn asked, trying to measure Silver Soul's massive frame as compared to the castle's courtyard.

There is a better place to reach your Rohan more quickly than that, Silver Soul said.

You know where he is? And his mind immediately flashed back to the strange crypt.

You opened your mind to me. I had to know all before I helped you, she responded.

Oh… oh, good. I guess… He couldn't help but feel a bit overwhelmed that no thoughts had been hidden.

Child, you have no secrets that would shock me. The mountains and the seas are my equals in terms of age, she answered with seeming amusement.

You make me feel so… young.

You are.

Then I trust your judgment. Take us to the better spot! Finn couldn't help but let out a wild laugh as she turned sharply and led them over the top of the castle.

Finn could see the Guard below them running around like ants on an ant hill. He wondered if Leonid was among them. Silver Soul then circled down towards a beach at the far side of the castle. There was a sheer rock cliff and the castle was on the top. Silver Soul landed surprisingly lightly on the beach and Finn easily jumped down.

There is an entrance to the lower levels of the castle right there behind those vines. Silver Soul dipped her head towards a nearly hidden entrance in the sheer rock wall.

Thank you, Silver Soul! I have no words to express the deepness of my thanks! Finn cried.

The wyvern queen inclined her head but then looked out at the Iron Sea. *I sense good fish. I will eat.*

Thank you again! Finn touched her forelimb and she regarded him steadily.

He wondered if he would see her again. If she really wanted anything from him. If she would return to Aymar or simply fly away. But his wonderings would have to wait. Rohan needed him. He turned and raced towards the vine-covered entrance.

INTO THE DARKNESS

As Finn parted the vines that created almost a door to the cave, his nose crinkled. The smell of death--sweet, sickening corruption--flowed over him. This was definitely how Marikoth herded the dead into the castle. Finn wondered if Rohan even knew this entrance existed. He could imagine the Rirean king searching every nook and cranny of the castle as a boy, but with his parents' deaths that might have been cut off and this part of the castle left unexplored.

Finn stepped inside and let the vines fall back in place. The cave was already dark even this close to the entrance and Finn started to move slowly forward. There was no raven to guide him. Not that he could have seen a raven in this gloom, even with the ball of energy that propelled it.

He put his hands out in front of him to stop himself from blundering into a wall. He hoped that all the undead that had made it to the castle had been destroyed and that he wouldn't suddenly find something squishy and stinking in the dark under his fingers. At that thought, a bright spark of white light appeared on the ring finger of his right hand.

Amarathar! Light in the Darkness! The ring my father gave me.

Finn recalled how he had made the ring give off illumination last time and the ring obliged easily now, casting a broad bright circle of pure white light around him and ahead of him. In addition to giving off light, the ring was also said to destroy the undead. He wondered how. But it would probably be easier for him to just drain them with his Death Magic ability then learn the ring's secrets. Though, then again, maybe what powered the undead wouldn't be capable of being drained or might poison him if he did drain it.

As there were no undead directly in his path, Finn put that idea to the side. He had to move quickly to get to Rohan. It had still appeared to be morning outside so it hadn't been too long since he'd seen the Rirean king.

The floor of the passage contained drifts of sand, which gradually tapered off the further he went from the entrance. The floor was smooth, clearly having been cut and leveled. The walls too were not the rough-hewn ones of a natural formation but were clearly crafted. The ceiling was rounded into an arch overhead. It didn't look like typical Rirean work, not even older Rirean architecture. It felt Fae and it also felt ancient.

Because of these features, Finn could move swiftly and didn't fear tripping over any rocks. The passage sloped upwards. There was a trickle of water that ran down the center, heading towards the sea. The smell of the undead was stronger now as if they had clustered thickly here. Finn caught sight of bits of flaking, rotting cloth, an old worn shoe, and a tattered sleeve that were left on the ground as if they had simply fallen off the undead in their haste to get inside the castle. He also saw what looked like *toes* and *fingers* that twitched slightly as he passed them. They were dried out, husks of flesh,

barely resembling anything living, but they caused Finn's gorge to rise nonetheless.

The passage suddenly opened up into a large cavern that soared above Finn's head. He urged Amarathar to brighten further and the ring obliged. It's light extended almost as high as the cavern's ceiling and Finn let out a gasp as he caught sight of a beautiful mural of two Fae stretched out above him. One was dressed in brilliant green and had pure white hair. This Fae reached towards a forest much like the one in the Empire that was overgrown and threatened to choke on the vines and life that teemed there. The Fae was *draining* that life and was *feeding* it to another Fae who wore red and gold. This second Fae stretched out his hands and power streamed from them to objects and people and even a city.

That's like Rohan and I!

But Finn's gaze snapped away from the mural as he heard a low, hungry moan. At the far reaches of the light, figures started to appear. They shuffled towards Finn in a swaying manner. The sweet reek of death flowed from them. Finn's stomach clenched. Beyond them, up a set of stairs was a doorway that must lead into the castle. Finn had to get past them, through them, or around them to get to it.

I cannot allow these creatures to remain regardless. They could hurt someone and they deserve earthly peace themselves.

Finn's eyes narrowed as he saw the dozens of undead in various states of decay lumbering towards him, arms outstretched, mouths open, moaning softly. He looked for the strings of light that all other beings had. But he found none.

Instead, he saw pinpricks of sparkling matter within them, as if one of those strings of life had been chopped up into little pieces and scattered over them. He had been right when he theorized that draining them wasn't going to work. He frowned and wished he'd brought a weapon. But he did have one. His eye caught sight of his ring. Amarathar! But how to make it work?

His father had said that will was what caused magic to do what the user wanted. So maybe if he *willed* it to destroy these creatures it would? He hardly had a chance to think about willing such a thing when he felt the swipe of rotting fingers against his back. Finn jerked away, stumbling slightly, at the unexpected touch. The undead had been ahead of him, not behind! But he quickly saw his mistake. The undead had been standing against all of the walls, swaying, just out of his line of sight. Now they surrounded him, an ever tightening circle of undead bodies.

Another hand brushed his shoulder. Finn jumped away, only to stumble against *another* undead. This one was a woman with no eyeballs and sloughing off skin. She wrapped her rotting arms around him and opened her mouth. The reek of rot spilled over Finn's shoulder causing his stomach to roil and his knees to go weak. That was his way out thankfully as he slid down and out from her grasp. He rolled away from her.

But he couldn't roll very far or he would have crashed into more undead legs. Finn hopped to his feet as a child's corpse opened its mouth right near his left wrist to take an eager bite. Finn pushed the child back. It fell on the ground and the other undead stomped on it as they headed towards him. It's delicate skull was crushed under their countless feet and they tracked its blood and brain towards him.

Finn pushed, kicked, spun, ducked and crawled. But the undead were everywhere! They were bunching around him in an ever tightening circle. Soon, there would be nowhere for him to go!

My powers are useless here! Why can't I create fire to burn them up? Or…

His mind stopped as Amarathar turned red-gold from the icy white light it had been giving out so far when he'd thought of fire. Maybe he had been willing the ring to do the *wrong* thing earlier.

Rohan, Serxio and Leonid had said in their battle with the undead in the forest that only fire had worked. So maybe *that* was what Amarathar created.

One of the undead grasped the back of Finn's neck. Another caught his shoulders. Another his wrists. Another child undead had his ankles. Finn screamed in disgust and fear. But then he formed that scream into a thought.

FIRE!

There was a blinding flash of red-gold light that flowed out from the ring on his hand. It was a wave of *fire*. Flames rolled out all around him, engulfing the undead and setting them ablaze. He didn't even feel the heat though. It was as if he was fireproof as Amarathar turned all to ash around him. It took seconds. But it felt much longer.

When the last undead was destroyed, Finn stood there, breathing heavily, his body shaking. Ash drifted down like snow all around him. Everything was silent except for his frantic breaths. The red-gold light had changed back to the icy white glow in Amarathar's heart.

Finn covered his face with his hands for long moments. He had almost been overcome by these hapless, terrible creatures. Without the powers he knew how to control, he was helpless, hopeless, *pathetic*.

He thought he could go up against Marikoth? Like this? How could he be Death's Chosen when he knew nothing? He was sure that his powers allowed him to do far more than simply drain things of life but he didn't know how to access those gifts! For a moment, anger roiled within him at the unfairness of Thalanil not thinking he needed training in Death Magic. He wasn't like other mages. He was nearly singular. Nearly unique. But the one person who could teach him wouldn't, because Marikoth knew he would only be teaching his enemy.

I surprised Marikoth that one time in the death dream, but he won't let me overcome him so easily. He'll have a plan. A way to stop me. And I have just the one trick!

Silver Soul was right that this was a trap. He'd been just arrogant enough to think he'd survive it. But he had to. Somehow. Rohan needed him. Even now he could picture Marikoth hunkered over the Rirean king, stroking his face with those long-fingered hands, cooing at Rohan while those red eyes filled with insatiable hunger.

That imagining had Finn firming his shoulders. He lightly ran towards the stairs and up to the door into the castle. He had to stop Marikoth. He would do whatever it took to save Rohan. He would use every last bit of energy within him to do it!

VISION

The door into the castle was extremely heavy and made of four-inch-thick metal. But the edges around the lock were peeled back and the solid, metal rods that slid home on the inner side were shattered. Magic--powerful magic--had been used to force it open. Finn could still smell the magic in the air. A bitter, smoky scent that overrode the sweet stink of death. He wrinkled his nose and slipped through the opening into the hallways beyond.

Rohan was somewhere ahead of him.

He would get to the Rirean king no matter what it took.

The Ring of Amarathar illuminated the hallway. It was made of the same stone as the tomb that he had seen through Rohan's eyes. This was the beginning of the crypt. The hallway had a barrel-vaulted ceiling. Niches were cut into the walls for corpses to rest, though there were no bodies in these ones. Yet Finn swallowed shallowly as if he feared ingesting the remnants of death in this place.

Palms sweating and heart pounding like a drum, he whisper-glided down the hallway. He kept the light from Amarathar to the glow of a night insect, just giving off enough illumination to see a step ahead of him, but hopefully not bright enough to alert anyone to his position. As he moved further down the hallway, rooms opened up on either side of him. Yawning, black spaces from which cold air whistled and caressed his face like an obscene invitation.

He shivered, wondering what was inside these spaces, and yet he did not dare to increase Amarathar's illumination to find out. There was a sense of watchfulness, as if still and silent beings observed him from the dark. His shoulders twitched as he imagined bony hands stretched towards him and eyes full of alien light boring into his own.

It was hard to believe that all of this lay under the castle and he'd never known. It unnerved him. He could sense the ancientness of this place and its secrets. Incongruously, humans lived and worked above, completely unaware that these Fae spaces lurked below.

Thankfully, Rohan is not within these shadow-shrouded rooms. It was light where he and Marikoth were speaking.

But were they still where he'd last glimpsed them? Was Rohan still alive? How much time had passed in Rirea since he'd left the Empire?

He knew that thinking this way was not productive. The time had been as wisely spent as he could have used it. The raven had told him that flying on Silver Soul meant he could save Rohan. He had to believe that or otherwise… otherwise didn't bear thinking about. But still, dread and rage mixed in his chest in a toxic brew. His magic surged inside of him, wanting out, wanting to destroy. Could he kill Marikoth? He might find out.

After ages of darkness and white stone, the hallway suddenly widened and there were more and

more side chambers. His path was also on a steeper incline than before. The air felt warmer, though not cleaner, as the stench of the undead still hung thickly around him.

How long did Marikoth have these undead lingering in here waiting to strike? How long has he been planning all of this?

Marikoth had been on this side of the Wall siphoning life from the very land itself for longer than Finn or Rohan had been alive. What if he had made a place for himself here in the dark and dust of ages past? Rirea was closest to the Empire. Perhaps he'd hoped that Thalanil would notice the loss of life here and be spurred on to act, to bring down his Wall, and come here. But no, Finn's father had ignored everything beyond the green, glass slab. Finn would not.

And that is probably playing into his hands. But what else can I do?

There was light up ahead! Finn doused Amarathar. He slowed his forward dash as well, crouching down, and creeping as silently as possible towards the light. His ears strained for the sound of Marikoth or Rohan's voices. His uncle seemed to enjoy talking to his prey so Finn fully expected to hear him making honeyed threats and promises about what he was going to do to Rohan and Finn. But it was silent. Finn frowned, but continued onwards. Again, what else could he do?

Silver Soul told me this was a trap. And it must be. But there's nothing else to be done. Hopefully I can overcome my uncle.

Marikoth was his uncle. Marikoth was family. In another life, his uncle should have been teaching him to use his powers. He could almost picture it. In fact, he *could* picture it. The image was so strong it staggered him.

He saw himself, Rohan and Marikoth in one of Aymar's gardens. Marikoth was smiling at him with affection. There was none of the cruelty that was usually upon his face. He almost appeared relaxed. He definitely appeared *happy*. That alone had Finn confused. It wasn't the evil glee he'd shown Finn in the past, but instead true happiness.

And then Finn forgot himself. Forgot where he was. Forgot why he was there. Forgot what he was doing.

He smelled Aymar's sweet flowers. Warm breezes stirred his hair. Rohan sat within reaching distance, booted feet stretched out before him, head resting on the back of his lounger. His blue eyes were hooded and a faint smile played on his lips. He wasn't in his armor but just a simple white silk shirt and black pants. Lightbringer leaned against the arm of his chair. There and ready, but there was no danger so it remained sheathed. Finn's heart beat faster.

Rohan!

He reached for the Rirean king, but Marikoth's voice stopped him. "Now, nephew, I shall be as clear as glass. All I know of Death Magic *you* will know. The two of us will have no secrets from one another. And we will bear all burdens of our unique magic together."

Finn's head snapped towards his uncle. Marikoth was leaning forward, elbows on knees, regarding Finn with an open expression. Finn blinked. What had Marikoth said? Had he offered to teach Finn? To be completely open with Finn about Death Magic? How could this be? This couldn't be real! It couldn't… could it?

"You'll teach me *everything*?" Finn heard himself asking. "We'll help each other?"

He looked down at his hands. He could learn to wield this power he had. Maybe he could *create* things and not just destroy them. He yearned to use his magic to help and not simply harm. Could Marikoth truly teach him this? Was it possible for a Death Mage to simply be a *mage*?

"How else will we keep this world safe unless we harness our powers together with Rohan's?" Marikoth asked as he cocked his head to the side in bewilderment.

Finn blinked. "*Both* of our powers? But… but..."

There was something wrong here. Something he remembered about there being only *one* Bonded One and the heir. Not *two*. And Marikoth didn't want to share power but he now claimed that they *both* were working together?

"It was not an accident that we both have these powers. We're meant to work together. To learn from one another," Marikoth said as he leaned further forward in his chair and clasped his hands together. "Don't you think?"

"I don't…"

Again, something seemed *wrong* here with what Marikoth was saying. Not wrong in that Finn didn't want this. He did! To have Marikoth not be twisted and evil but kind and warm, to be with Finn instead of against him, to be his friend and not his enemy, to be his family and not a stranger, to be his teacher instead of his adversary was beyond a dream. Neither of them would be alone with this terrible gift if this was true. They could face and fix whatever was happening to Rirea and the Empire together!

"I want that to be true," Finn admitted.

Marikoth's elegant eyebrows lifted. "You're afraid that there can be only one of us?"

"Isn't that what you've always believed?" Finn challenged, though he was again having trouble remembering exactly when that had been said.

"Yes, but I was wrong. I'm happy to be wrong." Marikoth shrugged and smiled broadly. "I've been alone my whole life. Felt like a freak. A monster."

Finn closed his eyes tightly as he absorbed those words. "Yes, I know what you mean."

"But now I'm not. Being singular has its… charms. But realizing that what I am is not some sort of aberration is far better." Marikoth laughed softly.

"How did we get to this point?" Finn opened his eyes.

"What do you mean, Finn?" Rohan asked, speaking for the first time.

"From--from *enemies* to friends?" Finn desperately wanted to remember how that had happened so he could… could what? It had already happened, hadn't it? He didn't need the knowledge to make it happen again.

Marikoth and Rohan exchanged an indulgent look as if Finn was being very silly. Rohan turned back to him and smiled.

"When we realized that the one way to save each other and the world all depended on it," Rohan said.

"But--but Marikoth wanted you for himself! He told you that I would never--never…" Finn blinked as confusion filled him.

What had Marikoth said? Why couldn't he remember?

Rohan got up from his chair, face filled with concern, and came to Finn. He got down onto his haunches by Finn's side and put his hands on Finn's arm.

"Finn, it's okay. We understand why you're confused," Rohan said gently.

"You do? Because I don't! I can't remember how we got here! I don't remember any of this!" Finn cried, his breathing coming faster.

"Do you not remember our wedding?" Rohan asked.

"Our… our *wedding*?" Finn stared. His heart flipped end over end. "We got married?"

"Yes." Rohan smiled fondly as if remembering that day. "With all our friends around us. Christopher was your best man while Serxio and Leonid were mine. I couldn't choose between them."

"They'd have been so hurt if you left one out," Finn said, still feeling unreal as he searched his memory for this wedding. But there was nothing.

"They would have, to be sure." Rohan laughed indulgently.

"But I don't understand--"

"Our marriage brought our countries together. Reunited them. And then the three of us fought the great evil--"

"Great evil? Isn't…" Finn's eyes flickered over to Marikoth. He dropped his voice, though he doubted Marikoth missed what he said, "Isn't Marikoth the great evil?"

"No, Finn. Marikoth is your uncle and my friend," Rohan stressed.

"He wants to take you away from me--"

"No, it's the three of us against the gods," Rohan told him.

"This isn't… this isn't right. I…"

"What isn't *right*? We're married. Happy. The world is at peace. Your uncle is here to teach you everything you need to know. No more secrets. No more lies. No more shame." Rohan squeezed his arm.

"Because it won't go this way." Finn stood up from his chair. "Marikoth is sick. Mad. He doesn't love me. He's not your friend."

Rohan got up as well. His blue eyes were luminous. "Finn, that's not true. He's the only one who supported us. Your father--"

"Where is my father? Where is Thalanil?" Finn demanded to know. That suddenly seemed very important.

The other two went still. Was there suspicion in their eyes? Were they simply pretending to be friendly when they really weren't? Hadn't this happened before? Why couldn't he remember?

"He should be around here somewhere. Where would Thalanil be if not in Aymar?" Marikoth asked with a rigid smile on his suddenly too thin lips.

Marikoth no longer looked relaxed or happy. He was tense. Taut as a bowstring pulled back and ready to fire.

"He's…" Finn pinched the top of his nose. He felt like he *should* know. He did know that Thalanil wasn't in Aymar, but where was his father? "I--I don't know! He's…"

"He should be here with us. With you. He wouldn't have abandoned you, would he?" Marikoth's voice dipped.

"He hasn't abandoned me! He loves me!" Finn cried.

He rubbed his temples as a headache flared inside of his brain. There was a stabbing pain going directly into the center of his forehead.

"Has he gone away, Finn?" Marikoth asked, his voice low and deep and insistent.

"He's… he's worried about me. He needs to know more about Death Magic." Each word felt pulled out of Finn. Cold sweat covered his face. He began to shake. Rohan did not reach out to comfort him. He couldn't really see Rohan. The sun was going down. Everything was getting dark…

"Our father. He's gone to see our dear father and left you alone," Marikoth let out a dry laugh. "I should have known that was the only way you'd have gotten here. He'd never have let you go otherwise."

"Gotten here? Aren't we in Aymar?" Finn asked.

"But I thought he must have sent you through a portal to get here so very fast, but evidently not," Marikoth continued, ignoring his questions.

The stabbing had joined a whining in his ears. It was so painful that he thought he might be sick.

He shut his eyes tightly and gritted his teeth. The pain was unbelievable! He opened his eyelids in the desire to stagger away and vomit. But the moment he did so, the pain receded to a faint throb and the urge to throw up retreated, too. There were other differences as well.

The garden was gone. The hallway was back. Marikoth stood not five feet from him. The other Death Mage was a study of white and grays. His clothes looked like burial garments. His skin was bleached of all color. He was thinner than Finn remembered him. Pared down to the bone was a description that Finn would have used to describe him. Only Marikoth's red eyes showed energy, glittering and dancing in the halflight. Finn staggered back and hit the wall. He was shaking. Trembling.

"You tricked me again! It was like that death dream of the forest!" Finn gasped out.

He had to gather his strength. He had to drain Marikoth. But his limbs felt weak as water. He couldn't move. Marikoth studied him for long moments.

"Yes, it was, but just like that one, this one sprang from your mind. Your dream. Your wish. Married to Rohan. Taught by me," he paused and then added, "*Loved* by me."

"That's not my dream. I know it will never happen." Finn grimaced as he steadied himself against the cold, stone wall.

"No, but you *wish* it would." And Marikoth sounded odd. Wistful. Surprised. "Interesting. But I suppose I can understand where this desire came from. Despite certain people's surface acceptance of what you can do, you know that only I can truly understand you and not turn away from your dark corners."

Trembling from the simple effort of keeping to his feet, cold sweat dripping down his face, Finn asked, "Where is Rohan?"

"He's alive. You heard what I said to him. He's necessary. I just took a little… *sip*." A wicked smile crossed Marikoth's lips. "He'll be just fine."

Anger flared in Finn's chest and that firmed his limbs. He wondered if Marikoth had taken a *sip* from him. He hadn't been able to in the first dream, but perhaps Marikoth had found a way around it. Or perhaps Finn had just been lucky the first time when the raven had appeared. There was no raven here now. No God of Death to protect him.

"Why did you bring me here?" Finn asked.

Marikoth drew one hand along the wall, languidly, but those fingers were coming towards him. Finn leaned away, but his legs would not respond to him.

Can I drain him? I don't feel capable of doing anything at all.

"I wanted to talk to you. To see if I was right," Marikoth said.

"About?" Finn's eyes were fixed on that nearing hand.

"With what I said to Rohan, that you would never betray Thalanil," Marikoth answered.

"You seemed pretty damned sure of it before!" Finn growled.

"Am I right or am I wrong?" Marikoth's eyes glittered.

That hand inched towards him. Cold sweat appeared on Finn's brow. He sent his senses towards Marikoth, looking for the strands of life, but he didn't see them. He saw pinpoints like one of those lines chopped up. He'd seen that before.

The undead… What does this mean?

He hadn't been able to drain the undead, but he had been able to drain Marikoth.

"Finn, are you going to answer me?" Marikoth chuckled.

"Nothing I say will change your mind. Because it isn't about that," Finn said. "You can't picture a world where Thalanil stands aside for the greater good or that we work together to fix things."

The smile had left Marikoth's mouth. His red eyes appeared more sunken, almost like the pits of a skull.

Bone-like. Skull-like. Pinpricks...

"You think I lack imagination?" Marikoth's voice was light.

"Yes. Why are you doing all of this in the first place?" Finn found himself asking. "For revenge against Thalanil? He had nothing to do with your exile. You know that. At least now you do, but you still want to hurt him."

"It was revenge--*is* revenge--on some level. But I wasn't lying about what I said to Rohan. I'm not responsible for all that's wrong with this place, let alone the Empire." Marikoth shrugged.

"So the gods cursed us then?"

"And themselves in the process evidently." Marikoth gave a bloodless smile. "No one believes in them anymore. Not really. Do you?"

Finn blinked as he only half thought on the question. He was more focused on Marikoth's bony fingers that traced a line on the wall.

"No, I don't, because the gods don't answer our prayers," Finn admitted.

I smell death. Sweet. Rotting. The closer Marikoth gets to me…

"Exactly!" Marikoth looked amused and paler still. "They must have thought that if they eliminated the great rulers that everyone loved that the populace would swarm back to them. But no one did."

Marikoth smells like one of his corpses, because...

"What a surprise it must have been to them that fear didn't restore faith!" Marikoth waxed almost poetic. He took a step towards Finn on bare feet, but there was a *click* when there should have been silence as he did so. "Instead, no one prays. No one seeks the gods' ears. No one wants to draw attention. So the gods are also cursed!"

"But we exist. And we have a chance to undo this damage. How are we here if they do not want us here?" Finn asked.

Another *click* as Marikoth stepped towards Finn as if his feet were made of *bone* and not soft flesh...

"If the gods brought us back, because they need us then they did a piss poor job keeping us safe, haven't they? Me, an exile. You, an outcast. Rohan, the king of a dying land with traitors all around. Hardly set up for success! We've survived in spite of our circumstances." Marikoth gave him a bloodless smile. His grin was all *teeth* and *bone*. "No, I think the gods are just staying out of our way and hoping to reap the benefits if we succeed. Well, if *I* succeed. Because you were right about one thing in that dream of yours, Finn. There can be only one Death Mage with the heir. And it won't be you."

Finn straightened and he allowed Amarathar to glow. Marikoth seemed to *ripple*. And in the wake of that ripple, Finn saw a walking skeleton.

"You're not really here, are you? Where are you hiding, Uncle?" Finn asked.

The skeleton grinned. "Clever boy! I had so hoped you would try and drain me. Ah, well, we'll have to fight the old fashioned way, but you forgot to bring a sword."

"I don't need one," Finn growled.

And he unleashed Amarathar's fire just as Marikoth lunged towards him. The skeleton turned to ash that dusted his face and air yet he still heard Marikoth laughing in his mind.

DREAMING?

Rohan swam to the surface of consciousness. His eyelids slowly opened. Sunlight was streaming through his bedroom's balcony doors, more golden and alluring than it had been in days, weeks, months or maybe even *years*. The light was so warm. It seemed to pierce him, soothe his aches and pains, fill him with renewed strength. He let out a soft sigh of contentment.

"He's waking up!" Serxio cried in a loud stage whisper. "It's working!"

He heard a *whap* and Leonid hiss, "Not so damned loud, Serxio!"

"What was that for?" Serxio sniffed. "We *want* him to wake up. And if he knows we're here--"

"If he knows *Finn* is here, he'll wake up," Leonid corrected the foppish young lord.

"He'll want to know we're all here," Finn said tenderly.

Finn? Finn is here?

"F-Finn?" Rohan creaked out and turned his head towards where the voice had emanated from. It was also where the golden sunlight sparkled. "Is that you?"

He blinked. The "sunlight" disappeared and it was Finn sitting on the edge of the bed, holding one of his hands, and smiling at him. The day had turned to night. It had been Finn who had given off that light. It was power, he realized. Finn had given him strength. Love overcame him and he was unable to speak. Finn was there! Right there! But why was he in bed when Finn was here? And how was Finn here? Had Thalanil relented?

"Rohan?" Finn's face burst into a broad smile. "It's me. You're safe now. Everything's all right."

Rohan saw Serxio and Leonid over Finn's shoulders. Their faces lost their pinched, concerned looks and flooded with smiles as well.

Serxio squeezed Finn's shoulder. "You did it!!"

"Of course, he did! He arrives on a damned dragon, takes out a whole army of undead in the crypt *and* saves Rohan from Marikoth! That's our Finn!" Leonid beamed with pride.

Finn appeared bemused by this. "Silver Soul agreed to fly me here. She could have easily said no. As to the rest… Both were Amarathar's doing. Not mine, not really. And it wasn't Marikoth either. I just met a glamourized skeleton. If it really had been him, I'm not sure what would have happened."

Marikoth…

For a moment, Rohan had no recollection of the other Death Mage or the undead or a dragon, but then the memories swept over him and he was rocketing upwards in bed. He gripped Finn's hand so hard that it likely had hurt. His vision spun but he forced the accompanying nausea down.

"Marikoth was in my parents' crypt!" Rohan cried. "I need Lightbringer. Wait! It didn't work against him! I had no magic!"

Finn put a hand on Rohan's shoulder and eased him back onto the bed. "I know, Rohan. I'm sorry.

So sorry. I should have been here. I've just had a chance to give you enough power to bring you back to normal. I'll have to drain some more life to refill Lightbringer."

"Why are you sorry? You're not at fault!" Rohan reached up and cupped Finn's face. "You're really here. By the gods, you're really here."

Finn turned his head into his hand, nuzzling his palm. "Yes. And I don't intend to leave you. Not until Marikoth is dealt with."

"But your father--"

"It doesn't matter what my father says." Finn tossed his head back, his green eyes glinting.

So much for what Marikoth believes about Finn not bucking his father's desires.

"Yes, well, is King Thalanil going to bring the whole Fae army down upon our heads any minute now though?" Serxio asked with a worried expression.

"No, Thalanil is not in Aymar and won't return for likely a month's time, at least in Rirea time. He…" Finn pressed his lips together. "He went to see my grandfather to find out more about Death Magic. Aymar was attacked, you see, and I protected it. But I fell unconscious afterwards and--"

"Your hair." Rohan touched the newly white strands that framed Finn's face. He had seen them earlier in the Luminus.

Finn ducked his head and tugged at the white locks as if he wished he could hide them or pull them out. "Yes, it's going white after I use my powers. Like Marikoth's."

"You're nothing like him," Rohan growled. "And it's beautiful. You're beautiful."

Finn blushed. "Thank you. I shouldn't care about the hair, but I'm glad you don't think I am like my uncle."

"You never will be. Never could be," Rohan said loyally. He tried struggling up again. "He told me something--something that aligns with some of my own research, that--that--by the gods, why am I so breathless?"

"Marikoth drained you almost to death," Finn whispered. "He said he took only a *sip* but he lied. I've replenished you, but you must rest, Rohan."

Rohan grimaced. He fell back onto the pillows with a grunt of disgust. "I can't be flat on my back like this! Not now!"

"You will recover, I promise," Finn said, soothing him.

Rohan was back looking at Finn and beaming. He repeated, "You're here. I can't believe it. I didn't know when we would be in each other's company again."

He was rewarded with another blush and a duck of Finn's head. "Neither did I. Marikoth did us one favor. He brought us back together."

Over Finn's shoulder, Rohan saw Leonid make a gesture at a beaming Serxio that they should leave the bedroom. Rohan was all for that. He wanted to be alone with Finn. But Serxio was sighing and staring at the two of them as if watching a play about two lovers and completely ignored Leonid's gesture.

"Serxio, we should give them time *alone* so that the king can rest, don't you think?" Leonid exaggerated every word.

"What? Oh! Ohhhhhhh, yes, yes, we should," Serxio said as he snapped back to himself.

"Wait, before you two go," Rohan said, "I need to know the status of the castle and Tearlach."

"No sign of any undead. No one was hurt. We've barred the entrance Finn found to keep any more nasties out that way," Leonid reported. "As to Tearlach… he's still claiming he was poisoned or something. States he never was in the lower levels or crypt. Never spoke to Christopher this morning. In fact, he claims he didn't leave his bed until I came to find him."

"Do you think he's telling the truth?" Rohan asked.

Leonid grimaced. "I'm not sure honestly."

"Marikoth was able to place a glamour on a skeleton," Finn stated. "Surely, he could make himself look like Tearlach, too."

"That's a possibility." Serxio nodded. Then he blanched as he added, "So that means that Marikoth is likely still in the castle, pretending to be someone else? Or was he that skeleton all the time? I'm confused about that!"

"Marikoth *was* here. He drained Rohan. He glamourized the skeleton to meet with me," Finn answered, his brow furrowing. "I was able to drain him before. He doesn't want to get up close and personal with me again so I think we're safe for now."

"And I want you nowhere near him either," Rohan growled.

"He must be stopped," Finn said in deadly earnest with no fear at all.

At that moment, Rohan understood why Marikoth had fled rather than face Finn.

"Yes, but Marikoth asked you to come here. Why?" Serxio asked.

"You--you were in my body again like that time after I fought Hex, weren't you?" Rohan asked.

Finn gave a brief nod. "And Marikoth knew. As to why he wanted me here, I think he hoped that it would cause my father to come."

"Of course! Thalanil would have followed you through the Wall!" Leonid pounded one hand into his other palm.

"Yes, that's the type of hunter Marikoth is. He waits in his blind for the prey to come to him. But Thalanil doesn't know I'm gone so no chance of him coming here," Finn answered with a shrug.

"Until he *does* know." Rohan frowned deeply. He remembered Thalanil's threats against Rirea. Not that he wouldn't fight the Fae king for Finn, but Thalanil would be no easy enemy. And that didn't take into account the breach that could occur between father and son if Finn disobeyed him. He did not want to be the cause of that. So, though it nearly killed him to say it, he did, "The longer you stay here, Finn, the greater the chance that Thalanil will discover your absence and walk right into his brother's trap. Perhaps--perhaps you should go back."

"No, I'm not leaving. Hiding behind the Wall has not stopped Marikoth's evil. It's only allowed him to harm others. My father might not see people other than his subjects as those that matter, but I do." Finn's eyes flashed again. "Ryleth is in Aymar. She knows about the Luminus. She'll find it and contact us. We can explain to her what's happening and she can alert Thalanil about the danger when he returns.."

"He'll definitely come if he knows Marikoth tried to attack you," Rohan pointed out.

"Yes, but we have time to figure everything out. That's the one benefit about the time difference between Rirea and the Empire," Finn explained.

They did have time. A whole month! A month of being with Finn! A month of holding him, kissing him, showing him the beauty of Rirea instead of the sour, and restoring what was taken from him.

Tanglewood.

Rohan began to plot.

"Oh, I know that look! The king's mind is already spinning," Leonid chuckled.

"You need to rest, Rohan." Finn gave him a stern look.

"Perhaps for a little while. We could… nap together? Unless you want to see your stepbrother," Rohan felt a stab of guilt that he would selfishly keep Finn beside his unconscious body when he could be visiting with Christopher.

"I saw Christopher on the way up," Finn said with a fond smile. "He helped carry you. He's now

neck-deep into his research into the undead. He wouldn't welcome my presence unless it was to hold something for him."

"And he'll forget his dinner," Serxio sighed, but then brightened. "Speaking of dinner! I shall have Cook Shelton prepare something on a tray for both of you after your nap."

"That would be wonderful, Serxio. Unless, Finn, you would like to be in the main dining room?" Rohan offered.

Even though he longed for an intimate dinner here, Finn had been in Aymar, supping on the best of foods and in elegant surroundings. He did not wish Finn to think of Reave Castle as stingy in comparison, though it probably was.

"Another time. I would love to have a cozy meal here with you." Finn smiled and then gave a little yawn.

"Perfect." Rohan's heart lifted. He looked to Serxio and Leonid who were both beaming at them. "I will see you two tomorrow unless I am needed."

"Oh, yes, of course, your majesty!" Leonid gave a bow.

"I'll have that supper prepared. It's so good to have you *home*, Finn," Serxio said a little teary eyed.

"It's good to be home," Finn agreed.

And Rohan's heart lifted even further. Finn felt like Rirea was home, Reave Castle was home, being with him was home.

His two friends left the bedroom. Finn and Rohan watched them go before turning back to one another. They were quiet, as if conversation eluded them now that they were alone and together again. Only the *crack* and *snap* of the fire broke the silence.

"I dreamed of being here with you," Finn said.

"As did I. Won't you lay down beside me? I would love to hold you," Rohan told him.

Finn blinked then nodded eagerly. He toed the long, suede boots off and untied the elaborate belt of the tunic he wore. Underneath, he had on a pair of cream silk leggings and matching shirt. The quality was something Rohan had only seen in his own royal garments, not the everyday ones, but the ceremonial clothes and, even then, not so fine. These were Finn's *usual* clothes.

How can Rirea even hope to compare to the Empire?

He knew that Finn didn't care about such things. But Rohan wanted to give him the best. Except his best paled in comparison with Thalanil's. Was that how Marikoth felt? Dumped on this side of the Wall to make his own way in a cold and dreary world compared to the beauty and bounty of the Empire?

No wonder he is so bitter.

Finn carefully crawled over him and into the bed. Rohan brought the covers down so that Finn could slip his feet and legs beneath the thick furs. Immediately, he opened his arms and Finn surged into them. The young man laid his head on Rohan's chest and curled an arm over his stomach. Rohan wrapped his arms around Finn and kissed the top of his head. The smell of Finn--pine and spice--filled his nose and he breathed in deeply. Speaking over the Luminus had not been able to capture this.

"You fit perfectly against me," Rohan murmured.

"I've missed the sound of your heart in my ears," Finn answered softly.

Finn lifted his head and Rohan could not help dipping down for a kiss. Finn tasted sweet to him. He lingered in the kiss. Continued it until he needed breath. They broke apart and rested their foreheads against one another's.

"Finn, thank you for saving me," Rohan said.

"There's no thanks needed," Finn told him. "Saving you is saving myself. I couldn't go on if--"

"But you must. No matter what happens to me--"

"Rohan!" Finn's face was full of alarm. "What are you saying?"

"I was like a child against Marikoth," Rohan admitted with a grimace. "I couldn't even lift my sword."

"That's only because you weren't powered up! That won't happen again. I swear it," Finn promised.

"You heard, did you not, what Marikoth said about using your powers? The more you use them, you risk madness," Rohan reminded him.

"Marikoth lies," Finn replied with a mulish look.

"I do not think he was lying about that," Rohan said.

"He's used far more power than me and he's not completely crazy!" Finn pointed out. "Besides, we're together. That has to count, doesn't it? If we are truly cursed by the gods, it's only because we were apart."

Rohan stroked Finn's cheek. "I do not know that I want to risk you regardless."

"If we don't stop Marikoth, there won't be any future anyways," Finn said. "He won't stop trying to lure my father from behind the Wall. He'll turn every single person in Rirea and beyond into the undead to do it."

Rohan pressed his lips together. "You're right, but--"

"There are risks to what I do. I don't deny that. But the risks if I do nothing are far greater. You said you were doing some research on Death Mages?" Finn asked.

Rohan cupped his cheek, running this thumb along the delicate orbit of Finn's right eye. "My uncle has books that seem to track what Marikoth was saying. I haven't had a chance to go through them all. But I bet there's more."

"There might be more down in the crypt. There's a gigantic mural of what looks like an Aeturnal and a Death Mage working together," Finn told him. "And there are rooms upon rooms down there. I don't think it's all for the dead. I'm positive it's not."

Rohan lifted both eyebrows. His parents had always barred him from going into the catacombs and, after their deaths, he could not bear to pass by their sarcophagus.

"We shall have to investigate that," Rohan said.

"I wish Ryleth were here rather than back at Aymar," Finn sighed. "She would know so much more about what to make of all we find. But at least you can read most Fae dialects. I--I didn't get very far in my studies with Lord Camrys."

"Lord Camrys?" Rohan's voice lifted as he imagined a dashing Fae. "Who is--"

"A stuffy teacher who likely thinks I'm hopeless when it comes to even the simplest Fae dialect." Finn actually stuck his tongue out.

Rohan laughed. "I'll teach you. You're not hopeless at anything!"

Finn brightened. "I often thought if you were my teacher that I would learn. But maybe that's just because I focus on you. I don't care about anything else when you're near. With Lord Camrys, I just wanted to go play with Tyreon."

"Speaking of the fluffy bastard, how did you get here without him? Leonid said something about a dragon?" Rohan looked meaningfully at Finn.

"Silver Soul. Remember I told you about her? She's my grandmother's wyvern," Finn answered.

"You mean the one that *eats* people?" Rohan's eyes grew very large as he recalled what Finn had

told him about the wyverns.

“Ah, yes, but she hasn’t done that in a while. And she wasn’t going to eat me. In fact, she's still fishing in the Iron Sea unless she’s gone back to Aymar. The Wall doesn’t seem to exist for her,” Finn explained.

“There’s clearly a story here,” Rohan let out a brief laugh, though he was still alarmed that Finn had ridden a wyvern known for her uncertain temper.

“There is, but you need to rest,” Finn said firmly.

Rohan turned onto his side and slid a hand suggestively along Finn’s delicate throat. “I am not quite tired now. But perhaps we could enjoy this bed in a different way.”

A delicate pink flushed Finn’s cheeks. He took Rohan’s questing hand and placed it over his heart. “Yes, I want that too.”

Rohan's hand drifted down Finn's throat. His skin *tingled* in its wake and Finn arched back to expose more of himself for Rohan to touch. The Rirean king went to the clasp that held the two halves of his wrap-shirt together and undid them. His whole chest was exposed. Rohan's mouth was immediately on his skin, kissing and licking as if to devour him. Finn gasped as heat built between his legs and his cock immediately hardened at the touch.

Starved for this. Starved for him, Finn thought.

When Rohan's mouth fastened onto his right nipple and sucked, Finn's hands scrabbled at the air. Electric tingles of heat erupted from that spot and flowed all over his chest. He drew in air like a horse might when running at high speed.

Rohan pulled off for a moment and murmured, "Gods, the taste of you. The feel of you. How have I lived without this?"

Finn's hands went to Rohan's shirt and urged him to take it off. He wanted to touch Rohan too. He wanted to let his mouth drift over that muscled chest that was so different from his own in its peaks and valleys.

Rohan lifted the shirt off and sent it flying. His hair stuck up on end and Finn couldn't help but laugh. The Rirean king lifted an eyebrow in surprise and then touched his hair and laughed, too. He tried squashing it down, but it still stood on end.

"Let me help you," Finn said.

He raked his fingers through the thick strands. Finn found something--ash--mixed in with the dark strands and plucked it out. Rohan suddenly grew embarrassed and let out a different kind of laugh.

"Gods, I must smell of the undead," he said. "Perhaps I should bathe before we--"

"I do, too. And wyvern and Ostil probably," Finn admitted with a shrug.

Rohan's forehead furrowed. "Truly? Because you look clean as a daisy as you always do! It must be a Fae thing."

Finn let out a laugh. "You've got quite a bit of Fae blood yourself, Rohan!"

"I know. But I must have gotten the kind that *attracts* dirt." Rohan gave a moue of displeasure.

"You're perfect," Finn contradicted. "You are a king of the people. You are always out there, in front, doing whatever hard work needs doing. And if you smell of--"

"Horse dung? Undead rot? Musty armor?" Rohan's lips twitched as if wondering what stench would be too much to be found "perfect" in Finn's eyes.

"All of the above, plus a hint of sweat." Finn grinned. "You're still perfect. And I love every bit of you."

Rohan kissed him. It started slow and sweet, a brief press of lips, but it deepened within seconds

and their arms were winding around one another like crawling vines. Finn could not let him go. It had been so hard to believe that Rohan was right there to touch not minutes ago, but now that he was sure Rohan was there and real, he could never release him.

When they broke away to breathe, Finn said, "We'll bathe together after we make love. And then we can make love again in the bath."

Rohan's eyebrows rose and he nodded. "I believe I agree with your plan, Prince Finrael. You are a master strategist."

He sealed that compliment with several kisses all over Finn's face. Then, without further conversation, they were stripping the rest of each other's clothes off. Finn still was a little shy about himself, but Rohan had never reacted in horror to his too thin form and he'd put on a little weight since living in the Empire. Yet, still he froze when Rohan paused as he regarded Finn spread out on the bed before him like an unwrapped gift.

"Rohan?" Finn asked and strove not to cover himself with his arms.

Rohan blinked and focused on his face. "You look so well, Finn. Sleek and healthy. Thalanil has been taking care of you."

"He has," Finn agreed and, with relief, let his hands go for Rohan's pants instead of worrying about covering his own body. "Other than him not letting me see you or my friends and other family and the Wall and not caring about Rirea…" Finn paused as he took stock of those things that Thalanil had *not* been good about, but he pressed forward, "other than those very important things, he's been wonderful. He loves me. He's just afraid."

Rohan wiggled out of his pants, showing those powerful legs and his already hardening cock. Finn's mouth watered and his hips shifted eagerly. He wanted Rohan inside of him. He missed that desperately.

"I understand," Rohan said, and it did sound like he understood, even though Thalanil's decisions were hurting him and his kingdom.

He wrapped his arms around Rohan's neck and drew the Rirean king down on top of him. Their bodies shifted over one another's and a thrill went through Finn.

"I know I've said this, but I will change his mind," Finn promised "And if I can't do it in time, then I'll do what's necessary--"

Rohan covered Finn's lips with his fingers and shook his head. "No, no, don't say that. Don't finish that statement. You love Thalanil and he loves you. I would never want you to have to fight against someone you love."

"But if Marikoth is right that only by joining the lands will this sickness fade--"

"Marikoth didn't consider all the options there are," Rohan answered firmly. "He acts from a place of cynicism and he sees everyone through his own lens. Meaning that if he would not do something then no one will and vice versa. But he's wrong. Very wrong."

"What do you mean?" Finn gazed up at Rohan.

Rohan let out a deep breath. "If the lands simply need to be connected again under one ruler to heal them and stop this terrible sickness then I will cede Rirea to the Empire."

"What?!" Finn was stunned.

"Under certain conditions, such as that there would be no human slavery and that the people would be equal citizens." Every word sounded agonized but firm from Rohan. "Being king means doing what is best for my people. And if I cannot help them in any other way than stepping down--"

Finn covered Rohan's lips with his fingers. "No! That will *never* be necessary. Thalanil will see reason. I swear it."

Rohan kissed his fingers and cradled Finn's hand in his own. "I hope it does not happen. But things are so dire here, Finn, that I can hardly call myself king in good conscience if what a king does is care for his people."

"That is because you need help! Rirea is bearing the brunt of this terrible… *curse*. But you are no longer alone," Finn said, filled with determination that nothing would shake. "I love you. I love Rirea. We will find a way."

Rohan let out a breath that Finn hadn't known he'd been holding in. He rested their foreheads together. "It is easier to carry this burden together."

"Yes, always."

They kissed again. Finn opened his thighs and Rohan slipped between them. Finn shivered and arched again as their bodies slid against one another. Rohan's cock ran along his own and then up his belly. He felt a trace of warm wetness as precum dotted his skin. He pushed up against Rohan's taut stomach.

His hands splayed across Rohan's broad back. Fingernails digging into it as he desperately rubbed himself to full hardness against Rohan's body. He wound his legs around Rohan's waist and felt rather like a limpet as his body tingled and sparked. It was almost like when he drained life, but so much *better*. For a moment, Finn made sure he *wasn't* draining life from Rohan, but the Rirean king appeared to be getting stronger and not weaker so Finn must not have been. Yet every time Finn shut his eyes he thought he saw golden light like when he touched the life force tendrils, but when he opened his eyes there was just the fire and candle light.

Rohan curled one arm around his waist and held Finn against him while the other searched blindly for something in the nearby nightstand. There was a crash as a platter fell. A tinkling smash as a tea cup must have shattered. And, finally, there was the fumble of a drawer sliding open and Rohan brought it onto the bed. Finn's curiosity allowed him to break away from the kiss to look at what it was.

It was a brass jar with a stopper. Rohan lowered Finn onto the bed, kissing him again and again before he finally drew back out of kissing range. Finn moaned and reached for him again. But Rohan resisted his efforts.

"I know, limpet, I want to kiss you too, but this time we will have something slick to ease the way," Rohan said as he uncorked the bottle.

"Mmmmm, it smells good." Finn blinked. "It reminds me of the trees when I was a child. Before they were all poisoned."

"It is oil pressed from the jakawa plant. They used to grow on some of the trees in the Lupine Woods. There was so much of it, that we pressed and exported our own oil," Rohan explained. "But now we have to import it from Bolan and it is exceedingly expensive and rare. But there is nothing better to use in lovemaking."

Rohan held the bottle by Finn's nose. Finn drew in the dreamy, spicy scent that reminded him of his mother laughing. Then Rohan was pouring some into his right palm.

"Don't use too much! If it is precious…" Finn stopped when he saw Rohan's slow, almost sad smile.

"Finn, nothing and no one is more precious to me than you. I would use all the jakawa oil in the world to give you pleasure," Rohan told him.

Finn's smile back was tremulous. He blinked back tears that were ones of joy not sadness. It was still hard to believe he was so loved.

Rohan urged him onto his front on the bed and slid a pillow underneath his hips. Finn tucked his

hands underneath the mound of pillows beneath his head and spread his legs. His cock throbbed as he anticipated what was to come.

Rohan's slick fingers trailed down the length of the crevice between Finn's butt cheeks. Finn took in a deep breath to try and relax himself as his anus automatically tightened. Rohan's other hand slowly rubbed a circle on the small of his lower back.

"So beautiful," Rohan murmured.

Finn blushed.

Rohan kissed down his spine even as that one slick hand parted his buttcheeks and trailed along his most intimate area. Finn shivered and his fingers tightened in the pillows. The Rirean king traced the swirl of muscle of his anus, coating it with the sweet thick oil. Finn parted his legs further and lifted up his hips. He wanted to be open for the king's use.

A single digit slowly pierced him even as Rohan slid his other hand around to Finn's front. It went in knuckle deep as Rohan cupped Finn's cock. Finn's hips jolted off the bed, which had Rohan chuckling in dark pleasure.

That finger moved inside of him, slowly and firmly, thrusting in and out even as Rohan began to stroke Finn's cock with a steady, sure hand. Finn's hips were off the pillow. He was practically on his knees.

A second finger joined the first and Rohan stretched them apart. Finn's toes curled. The feeling was strange, but good. He twisted his head to the side so that Rohan could kiss him. Lips and tongues and teeth. Heat. Breath.

A third finger sank into him and then all three spread wide. He moaned, biting the pillows beneath his head, as the pleasure-pain overwhelmed him. Rohan squeezed the base of his cock and he was relieved. He had nearly cum. He could feel his cock practically *thrumming* with the desire that ran through him.

Rohan brought those fingers in and out in that eternal rhythm. Finn scrabbled at the bedding. It all smelled of Rohan. He was surrounded by the man he loved. The longing he'd had for the Rirean king swelled within him. How had he survived a day without Rohan? An hour? A minute? They were to be together like this. They should never be parted. Finn's skin felt electrified. The hunger that rested inside of him now grew so small as to be insignificant. Behind his closed eyelids, the world glowed *gold*. Finn smiled.

Rohan was drawing out his slick fingers and arranging Finn on the bed. He moved in between Finn's legs. His powerful hands curled around Finn's slender waist. The head of his cock pressed against Finn's loosened opening. And then he was pushing inside.

Finn's mouth opened in a gasp of pleasure. Rohan pushed all the way into him. Their bodies were tightly pressed together. He could feel the hot push of Rohan's balls against the base of his opening. His thick cock pierced Finn to the core. He had to breathe around it. He was speared through with the pleasure of it.

That golden light *surged*. It not only filled the room behind his eyelids, but seemed to fill him as well. It was all around him and inside of him. Finn felt giddy with it.

Rohan's body leaned over his back. He felt the Rirean king's breath coast over his shoulder. Blindly, Finn turned his head and their mouths found one another as Rohan simply stayed fully inside of him.

"Revelation. You are a revelation, my love," Rohan whispered into the cusp of his ear.

And then Rohan began to move. The thrusts were slow, but deep. He controlled Finn's body as if it was a sheath for his weapon. Pleasure rolled through Finn in waves, flowing over him, consuming

him. Every part of him sparked. His cock was hard and leaking. He was certain the moment it was touched, he would orgasm.

Rohan laced their fingers together as Finn got up on his knees. He thrust inside and ground his front against Finn's back. His cock brushed against a pleasure center deep within Finn. His breath caught as a cry left his mouth of its own accord. Rohan gave a breathy laugh and repeated the movement. Pleasure zinged within Finn's body. Every single part of him felt as if it were giving out light.

The thrusts became faster and more erratic, not the smooth slide they originally were. Sweat coated their bodies. The wet, smacking sound of skin against skin filled Finn's ears. The slight sting from that contact stopped the pleasure from overcoming him completely. His own precum rained down from his cock and spilled on his thighs. He turned his head and his hungry mouth found Rohan's once more. Their lips locked as their bodies came together and stayed together. Finn gasped his quickening pleasure into Rohan's mouth. His desire was swallowed.

Rohan's hands slid from his hips to his stomach. They were just above the treasure trail of hair that ran down to his cock. Finn whined as the backs of Rohan's hands just barely brushed his sensitive organ. He was on the edge of the cliff. His orgasm would push him over and he would fall or fly.

Rohan bit and kissed his neck, licking off trails of hot perspiration that trailed down his throat in unending streams. The Rirean king brought their bodies together once more, sealing them back to front, and thrusting his cock to the hilt inside of Finn. The pleasure exploded within Finn. The golden light, which had surrounded him and suffused them as they were making love, suddenly blew outwards and Finn could see it with his eyes open.

Rohan cried out his release as his body emptied his seed into Finn and Finn's cock released its essence. The golden light, which had escaped from them both, suddenly came back. It suffused them once more. Blocking out everything. Finn could only see gold. He wanted to ask if Rohan saw this, but words escaped him altogether.

Exhausted and trembling from their joining, Rohan lowered them to the bed. He snuggled around Finn's body. Finn's eyelids shut. The golden glow was still there, but growing less blinding. Rohan kissed his shoulder and his neck. They were languid kisses, kisses of love and possession. Finn had never felt so treasured and safe and loved.

Sleep was tugging him down for a nap when Rohan let out a soft laugh. Finn's eyelids opened and he realized he was still seeing the golden glow, but it was not so blinding now and it came from a definite place. Rohan's body. Like when he had sent the power into Rohan in the forest and the runes had appeared on his arms, they were there now as well. But not just on his arms. Everywhere. On his chest, legs, back, neck and arms. They glowed with warmth. Finn stared at them.

"Rohan, you're--you're--"

"Fully powered," Rohan chuckled as he lifted his right arm up and admired the runes. "By the gods, Finn, how did you do it? Are you drained?"

"N-no! I'm… I'm *full* too," Finn said with a startled laugh. "I'm full, Rohan. There's no hunger. None."

Rohan kissed him deeply and fully. They held onto one another. It was a miracle. Or no, it was how it was meant to be. They were meant to be together. Blessed, not cursed. Fated.

PROMISES

"There's a dragon looking at us from the balcony, Finn," Rohan muttered into the pillow.

He lifted his head and stared at the beautiful yet terrifying creature that regarded them from the open balcony doors. Weak sunlight limned its head. Massive wings flapped to keep it airborne. Fangs the size of daggers lined a mouth large enough to gulp him down in one swallow.

"She's a wyvern queen. Her name is Silver Soul," Finn answered, his voice muffled from where he was cuddled against Rohan's side.

"I see." Rohan did not blink as the wyvern tilted her head to the side. "I wonder what she's thinking."

He was certain it was something to do with eating them. Lightbringer rested in its scabbard by the side of their bed. He could see the runes glowing. They'd charged it up with a second round of lovemaking. He could easily reach it if necessary and blast her. He imagined the wyvern flipping end over end and then coming right back at them.

"She says she understands why I came back to save you. She thinks you're handsome," Finn chuckled as he lifted his head too. His hair stuck up in many adorable directions that had Rohan smiling and forgetting his fear of them being eaten.

"Well, I'm so glad she brought you here to save my life, but what does she want? We ate all our dinner and breakfast has not been brought yet so we have nothing to feed her," Rohan pointed out.

"She is just checking if I wish to go back to the Empire," Finn explained.

Rohan's head whipped around towards Finn."You don't, do you? I mean… if you think it best to go--"

"No." Finn put a hand on Rohan's right forearm, his expression tender. "No, I'm not leaving."

Rohan drew in a deep breath as his chest released. "I'm… I'm glad."

"I meant what I said last night. We are going to deal with Marikoth. Together," Finn promised.

Rohan could have mentioned Thalanil again, but he didn't. Thalanil was not even in Aymar. He did not know his son was gone. So they had time to formulate a plan to convince the Fae king that he and Finn belonged together. A whole month!

Finn grabbed Rohan's shirt and pulled it over his head. It was so huge on him that it was more like a dress. He scooted out of bed and went over to Silver Soul. He stroked her snout and spoke lovingly to her. Rohan grabbed his robe off the back of a nearby chair and wrapped it around himself to join Finn on the balcony. Silver Soul's eyes tracked him as he approached. He grimaced as he forced himself to leave Lightbringer by the bed.

"She says you can touch her if you like," Finn told him with a bright smile.

"If I like? Hmmmm."

Rohan slowly lifted his right hand to stroke the silver scales that reminded him of liquid mercury. She was surprisingly warm. He expected her scales to be cool, but no, they were warm and more pliant than he'd thought. She moved her head towards him and he jumped back. Finn laughed.

"Silver Soul! Don't startle him! That's not funny!" Finn though kept laughing. "I'm sorry. She can tell you're nervous around her. You keep looking more longingly at Lightbringer than at me, according to her."

Rohan let out a snort. "I never would. But she has to admit that she is rather… magnificent. Who wouldn't be impressed with her and feel the need for a magic sword?"

Finn beamed at him and the wyvern actually seemed to flutter her eyelids at him. "She says that your name should be Silver Tongue for giving her such compliments!"

He patted Silver Soul's jaw. "I do try. Will she remain in Rirea or return to the Empire?"

He wasn't quite sure what he wished. Having a mighty wyvern such as her as an ally would be excellent, but she was a bit unnerving.

"She says she will be near. She likes the fish." Finn leaned over and kissed her.

Silver Soul's eyes widened and she snorted. She was as surprised as he was that Finn had kissed her. But then she appeared to smile.

If wyverns smile...

She flapped her wings and backed away from them. One of Rohan's arms went around Finn's shoulders while he held the other up to shield his eyes from the wind. Then she was off, soaring into the distance.

"I really need to tell the Guard not to annoy her in any way," Rohan muttered.

Already, he was picturing the Guard trying to hit her with bolts from their crossbows that would bounce off her hide. And then she would swoop down and devour the Guard in one bite. That would be a disaster.

"I'm sure you'll be getting dragon sightings by the populace all week!" Finn laughed.

"Oh, yes, I am most definitely sure."

Rohan led Finn back inside. He was going to lure the young man back into bed when he heard Ryleth's voice coming from the Luminus!

"Ryleth!" Finn darted to the magical crystal ball in the other room.

Rohan hurried after the Fae prince. Sure enough, Ryleth peered at them through the Luminus. When she caught sight of them, she waved wildly.

"Thank goodness! It took me forever to find this place! Why does the king not keep the Luminus in a more convenient location?" Ryleth asked.

"He doesn't think he has anyone to talk to in Rirea. Of course, he's wrong about that. Ryleth, are *you* all right?" Finn's voice went from bouncy and cheery to concerned.

Ryleth cocked her head to the side in confusion before her expression cleared. "Finn, you hardly took anything from me. I recovered within moments of you leaving me."

Finn let out a long breath. "I'm so glad. Oh! Oh, by the gods! Ryleth, I had to drain the wyvern stablemaster! I need you to check on him!"

But Ryleth was already nodding. "I know. He's quite fine. He was looking for someone in charge to tell about your leaving, but he found me instead. That's how I located this place."

"You are in charge, Ryleth. Always," Rohan said.

"Oh! King Rohan, how good to see you! You're all right. Prince Finrael found you in time. The undead were vanquished?" Ryleth asked.

Rohan put an arm around Finn's slender shoulders. "He did save me and the undead are gone. For

now."

"Most excellent. But though you have such faith in me, I believe there is a fight regarding who is in charge," Ryleth sighed.

"Let me guess," Finn said with a grimace, "it's between Lord Paquen and Lady Beinelis?"

"Right you are. Only Lady Beinelis deigned to talk to me. Lord Paquen couldn't be bothered and he's left in a huff," she explained. "Evidently, to discuss things with his people about Thalanil abandoning Aymar to his Death Mage son."

Rohan frowned. "What kinds of things is he discussing?"

"Bad things, I'm sure," she admitted.

"Ryleth, there's so much we have to tell you," Finn said. His hands anxiously wound together. "More than ever, we need to know about Bonded Ones and the Aeturnals."

"Will you be coming back here to tell me this story and ask me these things?" She looked at them both meaningfully.

"Not yet," Finn answered her.

"Prince Finrael, with your father gone, *you* are in charge here," Ryleth said.

"I can't believe my father would put me in charge quite yet. He thought I was ill. I mean, I *was* ill, so--"

"You are the prince," she stressed.

"Yes, and I'm here because there is a threat to the Empire and Rirea," Finn answered with just as much emphasis.

She sighed and squeezed the top of her nose. "You want me to cover for you, don't you?"

"Yes," Finn said.

"Please, Ryleth," Rohan asked. "Though I wish I could face this evil alone, I cannot. I need Finn's help. I think--no, I *know*--we can only do this together."

"You *do* have a lot to tell me," she said. "Oh, you're… *glowing*, King Rohan."

He blushed. "Yes, Finn… when we--"

"When we made love we both filled our power banks up, or whatever you would call it. I didn't drain anything or anyone, but we are fully magicked up!" Finn waved his hands.

"Magicked up? Is that a technical term?" Ryleth's lips twitched. "Well, I'm not surprised. Your, ah, *connection* is where your true power lies. Together is when you are most formidable."

"Well, we can't make love in front of our enemies," Rohan replied dryly. "We need to understand this connection so that we can fight."

"Which is why we need your help. I know my father is looking for answers, but you must know things," Finn said.

"First, you were going to tell me what *you* know," she pointed out, "and why you think staying in Rirea instead of the safety of Aymar is something I should agree to."

"Let us explain," Finn said.

Rohan and Finn told her everything that had happened with Marikoth. Rohan also filled Finn in more about the books he'd found in his uncle's library. And Finn spoke of the giant mural below the castle. Ryleth tapped her chin and murmured things like, "Yes, that makes sense" and "of course, it would be that way."

"Well?" Finn asked when he and Rohan had finished their tale.

"It's remarkable really. There is so much that confirms what I know, and yet so much more that seems mysterious to me." The Fae priestess' gaze was distant. "I would love to see that mural and those catacombs beneath the city. I think you're right Prince Finrael that there are secrets to be

discovered there."

"You could come. Find Tyreon and come through the Wall!" Finn said eagerly.

Rohan winced a little as he said, "If you do this, Ryleth, we would need to know when you would arrive to meet you."

A smile crossed her face. "Yes, I would imagine a full-blooded Fae would frighten the populace." She shook herself. "As much as I wish to come, I think I may be of more use here."

Finn let out an audible sigh.

Ryleth smiled. "I am glad you want my company. But you need answers more and someone to run interference here. There is already turmoil after the Ostil attack and," her red eyes flickered to Finn and away, "and how they were repelled."

"The people are scared of me," Finn whispered and curled a little in on himself.

Rohan put an arm around his shoulders. "They will learn not to be."

"Don't knock fear, Prince Finrael. It is quite an effective ruling technique," Ryleth pointed out. "The main reason that I should stay here is that there is something of use nearby. Do you remember Lyari, Rohan? The priestess that tried to take me into custody in Aymar?"

"Oh, yes, her. The one I announced I was the heir to?" Rohan scrubbed the back of his neck.

Ryleth chuckled darkly at the memory. "Yes, that was quite good. I especially loved how she ran away. Well, in any case, my old order has books in an ancient archive that I think have more answers for us. King Thalanil not only reinstated my priestess status, but also made me an official member of his household as Prince Finrael's teacher. I *should* be allowed to access that material." She flashed them a raven necklace. "This gives me power."

"So you're going to face down Lyari again then?" Finn beamed.

"Most definitely and I shall enjoy it," she laughed.

Rohan agreed. "Why did Thalanil not look at these tomes?"

"I didn't mention them. The order isn't supposed to have them," she admitted with a shrug. "And I believe he was right to search out for your grandfather, Prince Finrael. Those books were originally from the royal library. Your grandfather was the one to decree that they were to be destroyed. One of my fellow priestesses risked everything to steal them from the burning pyre meant for them and secreted them away."

"But, wait a minute, you were exiled because you were interested in all of this stuff! Yet your order had the books, too?" Finn sounded outraged.

Ryleth smiled thinly. "They didn't want *me* to know what was in them. That's why I was exiled." She shook herself. "Now, I have far more reason to read than I ever did. Not only out of pure curiosity, but purpose. I will get those books and tell you all what's inside them."

"We know you will, Ryleth," Rohan said. "We should plan to speak once a day at this time."

"Once a day in your time or mine?" she grinned. "It's been only a few hours since Prince Finrael left. I could hardly get anything done if I had to return here so often."

"Your time then," Rohan agreed with a shake of his head.

"All right. I have my tasks, but I will ask one of you, Prince Finrael," Ryleth said with considerable solemnity.

"What? If I can do it, I will," Finn promised.

"Don't promise before you know what I'm asking." She wagged a finger at him. "For I wish you to return to Aymar before your father finds you gone."

Finn burst out, "But he--"

"Prince Finrael, the only chance you have to reason with him will be if he is *not* out of his mind

with worry for you," she said. "You have time. Quite a bit of time in Rirea. But on this I must insist. I swear it is for your own good and that of the peace between Rirea and the Empire."

Finn's shoulders slumped. Rohan stroked Finn's hair back from his forehead.

"Ryleth is right. We cannot hope for Thalanil to trust us if he finds that we are going behind his back," Rohan admitted.

"He is so frightened of me being hurt that he doesn't understand that there are some things worth being hurt for," Finn said. But then he shook himself and told Ryleth, "I agree to your terms."

"Good. Now, put some clothes on… or take all of them off!" Ryleth laughed and then she stepped away from the Luminus.

"It's still hard to believe we're friends considering how we all met," Finn said with a sigh as he leaned his head against Rohan's chest.

"I know. But not only is she a good friend, but a wise one," Rohan said and kissed Finn's forehead.

Again, he was about to suggest they cuddle back in bed when there was a knock on the door to his quarters.

Finn was immediately answering, "Come in!"

Rohan groaned. He wasn't ready to face the world and responsibility. He just wanted to stay in bed with Finn all day. But maybe it was breakfast. They did need to eat. The doors to his rooms swept open and it was indeed breakfast and accompanying it was Serxio, Leonid and Christopher plus one of the royal tailors, who was carrying over his arm a variety of leggings and tunics.

For Finn! He realized. *He just has the one outfit and it's missing…*

They'd stripped off their things and he recalled, a little guiltily, tossing Finn's beautiful clothes over his shoulder and onto the floor. But they weren't there now. He immediately knew what happened. Serxio had come in and brought them to the tailor for sizing of new clothes.

Clever and thoughtful of him.

"You see, Milius? Finn's so lovely and he's stuck wearing Rohan's oversized shirts! He looks like an orphan!" Serxio wailed as he gestured to Finn who awkwardly tugged at the hem of Rohan's shirt that fell down to his knees.

"He is indeed as beautiful as you said. These clothes I brought him today are but momentary stop gaps while I work on the true artistry!" Milius, the tailor, agreed in his unctuous voice.

Milius was Serxio's most favorite tailor while he was Rohan's *least* favorite one. Milius was the most skilled, but Rohan liked plain, simple clothes while Milius' style was more… well, *more*. As much as Rohan admired Serxio's taste and Milius' craftsmanship, he knew that Finn would be more comfortable in plain clothes too. Especially since not even Milius could create anything like the fine clothes Finn had come in.

"Good morning, my king! Fine morning. Well, it's not raining," Leonid said.

"There is an 80% chance it will rain this afternoon," Christopher remarked.

"You won't be such a gloomy Gus after you eat!" Leonid laughed.

"I need to get back to my lab," Christopher muttered.

"After breakfast!" Leonid said.

Leonid and Christopher then soared past them with two huge platters of food and went out to the balcony table. It was warm enough to sit out there still and eat. Christopher gave him an almost apologetic look as he and Leonid started setting out place settings for five. Christopher might want to be in his lab, but he clearly knew that Rohan wanted to just be with Finn. Rohan tried not to sigh. It was good that they all eat together. He would have plenty of breakfasts alone with Finn, wouldn't he?

He would make sure they did.

Finn went over to the tailor and expressed admiration for the clothes. Rohan drew closer so he could see them. Finn would say anything was lovely even if it was hideous. But Finn didn't have to lie. They were very beautiful. Leggings in sheer blacks, dark blues, and brilliant greens like Finn's eyes. There were tunics embroidered with metallic thread at the collar and cuffs in grays, whites and blacks, too.

"I made sure that everything would go with your current boots while we have some others made, Prince Finrael," Milius enthused as he showed Finn garment after garment.

Finn stroked the material. "They're perfect. Thank you. I feel so guilty with all those beautiful clothes I have in Aymar and having these. I didn't have time to bring anything."

"Yes, your clothes." Milius lifted a finger. "You wouldn't happen to know the tailor's name--"

"Oh, yes, Taeral--"

"Taeral Balrois?" Milius was practically quivering.

"Uhm, yes, I think that was his full name," Finn said awkwardly.

"Oh, I knew it! I *knew* it! His work cannot be unseen! It is the most perfect! The most glorious! There are clothes from over a thousand years ago that still bear his mark!" Milius' eyes were huge. "It is such an honor to have seen his newest work. If only I could see your *closet*…"

"Ah, maybe another time." Finn backed away a little bit.

Rohan lifted an eyebrow at Serxio. The foppish young lord was blinking rapidly. When he saw Rohan's look, Serxio shrugged sheepishly.

"He's clearly a fan!" Serxio said.

"You must try these on, Prince Finrael! They're rags, I know! But I will study Taeral's work and create wonders for you!" Milius promised.

"Okay, sounds good!" Finn smiled a little awkwardly.

"He'll try them on later. Leave them," Rohan commanded.

The eager tailor bowed low and laid the clothes out on a couch. Rohan indicated he could go. And the tailor bowed his way out. Finn let out a sigh.

"Thank you for saving me," Finn said.

Rohan kissed his forehead. "It was purely selfish. I was afraid he would start waxing poetic about stitching."

"Stitching is very important, my king!" Serxio informed him.

Rohan put an arm around Serxio's shoulders. "I need a full stomach for that conversation."

The three of them joined Christopher and Leonid out on the balcony after he grabbed a blanket for Finn. They settled down to eat. There were creamy piles of scrambled eggs, dozens of rashers of bacon, toast with sweet butter and jam, and fresh-squeezed, tart juice. All of them dug into the meal and said nothing for the next fifteen minutes.

Sitting back contently, Leonid said, "What is the plan today, my king? Searching for Marikoth? Interrogating Tearlach? Maybe a little bit of both?"

Rohan was about to mention Finn and himself staying *in* for the day when Serxio said, "Forget about *today!* What about the promise you made for the *future*, King Rohan?"

"The future?" Rohan frowned.

"The *ball*! You promised if Finn came back that you would have a ball with feasting and dancing and romance!" Serxio pointed at him.

Finn blinked. "A ball?"

"When the King of Sultane and the Queen of Bolan come. They are to arrive soon. You will most

certainly be here when they are, Finn," Rohan said, stroking his chin.

"So… a ball? You did promise!" Serxio's lower lip quivered.

"Finn, would you like a ball?" Rohan asked.

"How could anyone not give into Serxio when he's making that face?" Finn laughed. "Yes, most definitely. A ball."

"All right then, it is sorted. We shall have a ball." Rohan smiled.

Serxio leapt to his feet and did a jig. Leonid pulled him back down.

"It is too early for that without a lot more drinking," Leonid said. "So what is our next move?"

Again, Rohan wanted to request something selfish, which was to laze the day away, when Finn piped up, "We should interrogate Tearlach and I want to walk the castle to make sure Marikoth isn't here. Though I'm sure he's not. He knows I can hurt him. But still, I should look. We also need to see the mural, Rohan, and--"

"Yes, yes, we should," Rohan sighed. He was not getting his day in bed. But they would have the night together.

"And I want to find Magna, Jacob and Emmott. Christopher, you don't know where they are, do you?" Finn asked.

"No idea. Just that they got away from my father in time," Christopher muttered.

"Are those the servants that used to work on your old estate, Finn?" Serxio asked.

Finn nodded. "Yes, I want to make sure they are all right. And I want to take care of them somehow."

"I'm quite good friends with many of the servants here. There's a network of people they can likely tap into and find your friends," Serxio said. "We'll locate them in no time."

Finn brightened considerably. "Oh, Serxio, that's wonderful! Thank you! Please put the word out."

"Happy to do it. They're still gathering information for me on Hugues. I need to get an update on that," Serxio said.

"Your love of gossip is finally being put to good use," Leonid muttered.

"Also, we should go see Miles, Christopher," Finn said softly.

Rohan realized then that there was something he had to do before Finn returned to Tanglewood to see his other stepbrother or, more importantly, his stepfather. He'd already started the process, but now he needed to speed it up.

"Miles." Christopher's lips pursed, but a shudder ran through him.

"I know you feel he's a lost cause, but--"

"Oh, I know he is, but you must see it for yourself," Christopher said with a wan smile. "But there's one thing I would ask of you, Finn."

"What? I'll do it," Finn said.

Rohan wanted to give him the same warning that Ryleth had earlier about not making promises to do things before he knew what they were..

Christopher's smile grew. "I need you to kill something for me first."

Meanwhile, in the Empire…

RYLETH SMOOTHED down the front of her tunic, making sure the Ravenspar pendant was front and center as she waited for Lyari in the cool confines of the Order's foyer. Beyond the white doors, carved with images of the sun radiating life down upon the Empire and its people, was her former friend's office. She was now Keeper as Ryleth had been before her.

Ryleth knew that office. It had been her own. She could imagine the golden wood desk covered in books and scrolls, the fire crackling softly in the fireplace behind her, the warm embrace of the leather chair and the scent of ink in the air. It had been her sanctuary, her place, her meaning. Now she stood outside waiting to be let in. Her right hand drifted up to the pendant again. She was no longer the exiled priestess in a forgotten village, she was Prince Finrael Ravenspar's official Mentor in all of the magical arts and that position, ironically, was far greater than that of even Keeper of the Order.

Should I march in there? Tell Lyari I'm done waiting? That she's keeping the prince waiting?

Ryleth allowed a thin smile to lift her lips. The guards on either side of Lyari's office shifted uneasily. It must not have been a nice smile. And she was already considered a heretic. Who knew what she might do? What ancient magic she might use against them? She was certain that every single person in Aymar--and especially in the temple complex--knew what Finn had done with his Death Magic. Even if they hadn't been up close and personal as she had been when Finn had attacked the Ostils, it had been terrifying to watch from afar, especially for the people here who scared themselves and others with just the *mention* of Death Magic. But to *see* it? To *experience* it? That was beyond many people's understanding. And that Finn was the *prince* and looked *human*…

Thalanil should not have left. I can practically smell the fear in the city. It will lead to something bad.

The guards regarded her uneasily. She stroked the chain that gave her power now. Even as time ticked on, she did not press her advantage. She was pretty sure that Finn would have no problem with her throwing her weight around to get the books she needed--that he needed--but questions might be asked, including ones that would require Finn to make a personal appearance, which he could, of course, not do. And if she said he was off as well as Thalanil, unrest would roll through the streets. Where was the Death Mage exactly? What was he doing? Eating babies? Planning on eating babies? It was all absurd. But it meant she had to keep a low profile.

Finally, the doors to her old office opened and Tela appeared. Her former apprentice jerked upon seeing her, even though Lyari must have sent the girl to get her. Yet her guilty expressions and ill movements told Ryleth that Tela was not so certain that Lyari could protect her.

"Tela. What an unpleasant surprise," Ryleth said.

"Mentor Ryleth, I didn't think to see you again… so soon," Tela tacked the last part onto her sentence.

"No, I'm sure not." Ryleth strode forward. The guards shifted again, but she froze them with a look. "But I planned on seeing you again, and I'm *certain* that Prince Ravenspar will be interested in finding out all about you and Thomas. Where is he exactly?"

Tela looked up at her and looked away. "Don't know. I'm not his keeper."

"So you just *let* a killer walk away from you?" Ryleth stepped closer to her.

Tela was forced to step back to avoid Ryleth being practically nose to nose with her. "I--I don't know--"

"What I'm talking about? You have no idea? You are the worst liar, Tela, but I didn't know just how corrupt you were when I took you on," Ryleth said, her lips compressing.

Tela had not been the most promising of students. But Ryleth had not exactly been a top teacher anymore. The girl had almost been thrown out of the Order several times. Her mentorship with Ryleth had been her last chance. And Ryleth had hoped to help her. Maybe to help them both. But she saw now what she hadn't been willing to see then. Tela was weak and corrupted.

"Are you going to come in, Ryleth, or are you going to continue to harass my assistant?" Lyari's voice rose up behind Tela.

"That's *Mentor* Ryleth," she responded.

Ryleth pushed Tela out of the way with a touch of magic. The girl pinwheeled her arms and stumbled backwards. She nearly landed on her ass, but caught herself at the last moment. And the room was before Ryleth. Her old office. She'd kept it simple. Pale, stone walls with the paintings of past Keepers who had brought distinction to the office. Now the walls were hung with gaudy purple silk hangings and the golden wood desk she'd loved had been replaced with a glass and metal contraption. There were no books or scrolls upon its top. It was completely clean of even writing utensils. The comfortable leather chair had been replaced with one that looked almost painful to sit in. And Lyari sat tall in it, hands together on the table before her, ankles crossed. Tela hustled over to Lyari's side, attempting to look distinguished. She failed.

She clearly hadn't been doing anything during the time that she had made Ryleth cool her heels. Ryleth's eyes narrowed for a moment, but then she forced her annoyance to the side. Finn and Rohan needed answers quickly, but allowing old wounds to interfere would not be wise.

"Mentor Ryleth, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Lyari smiled acidly. "I thought you would be with the Death… oh, yes, Prince Finrael, that's his name right? Your student?"

Ryleth's eyes narrowed. "I'm here to take out some books, Lyari."

"*Keeper* Lyari," she corrected with a thin smile. "And why would you need my help with that?"

"They're in the restricted archive," Ryleth retorted. "Which you know quite well that your acolytes did not let me access. Hence why I'm *here*. For I assure you, I have no desire to speak to you or," her lips flattened as she took in Tela, "others in this room."

Lyari tented her fingers under her chin. "Well, the restricted archive has knowledge contained within it that is very dangerous. We can't let just anyone take it."

"So I'm just *anyone*?" Ryleth's voice was soft and dangerous.

"You were exiled for your--your unnatural interests," Lyari said. "I don't know if the king is

aware of it. Though, perhaps he is, because of his half-blood son's affliction. Still, I thought it was prudent not to just let you waltz in and indulge yourself."

She knows the king is not here. Worse, she believes that even if he were here that she can speak of him like this. Things are moving in a bad direction, Ryleth thought. *Lyari reads tea leaves with the best of them. But the fact that she hasn't kicked me out or outright denied me access means she's not completely sure.*

Ryleth grasped the raven pendant and thrust it towards Lyari so she could get a better view of it, as if it hadn't been obvious before. "By the order of the king, I am allowed access to any material I desire. Or are you *refusing* me?"

Lyari froze at the "magic" words. This was a tipping point. Would she deny Ryleth entrance to the restricted archive? Defy the king himself? How sure was she of Thalanil's precarious position? The moments ticked by.

Finally, Lyari smiled, "But of course, you have access to whatever you wish, Mentor Ryleth. Tela, accompany the Mentor to the restricted section and let the sub-Keepers know she is to be obliged."

"Yes, Keeper Lyari!" Tela bowed so low that her head nearly hit her knees.

Ryleth's hands curled into fists. The last thing she wanted was Tela's attendance, but without her former apprentice, the sub-Keepers would claim ignorance that she was allowed into the restricted archive. Ryleth turned on her heel, not waiting for Tela. She knew where to go. Tela could catch up. But Ryleth paused when she got to the door, causing Tela to nearly run into her.

She turned and said to Lyari, "Do you know what's interesting?"

"I can't imagine what interests you, Mentor Ryleth," Lyari responded.

"The Order is to serve the kings and queens of the Empire for they have been appointed by the gods to rule us," Ryleth said quietly. "But the truth is that no one really believes in the gods anymore. So all the Order's power comes from its link to the royal family."

Lyari was very still. "Meaning?"

"That if the royal family goes, so does the Order," Ryleth answered and then left the office.

THE FIRST TASK IS DEATH

Back in Rirea…

"NOW I WANT you to kill it, Finn," Christopher said as they all looked at the rat in the tiny cage on his workbench in his laboratory.

Serxio tugged at the top of his brilliant yellow tunic as he stared at the caged rat. Leonid grimaced. Rohan frowned. They had finished breakfast, bathed, dressed--Finn wore one of Milius' black tights and sage green tunics with silver embroidery--and were now down in Christopher's laboratory to start the first of their many tasks that day. And the first task was *death*.

"But…" Finn swallowed as the rat squeaked piteously and turned around in a tight circle trying to find a way out of the trap. "He's so cute."

"They spread disease," Christopher said firmly.

"Oh, not him!" Serxio breathed. "He's got a nice furry face."

"Eh, you didn't say that about the rat that ran over your boots the other day," Leonid pointed out. "I believe you screamed and begged me to kill it, kill it now, Leonid! Those were your exact words."

Serxio sniffed. "That was understandable! I was surprised! And the rat was not where a rat should be."

"The rat is in a trap," Leonid said.

"Exactly! He's contained. He's not hurting anyone," Serxio said.

"But for me capturing him this way, he would already be poisoned and bringing death home to his family," Christopher pointed out. "Now--"

"I've only ever drained something to death, because it was a direct threat," Finn said quietly. "This rat is caged. It's not a threat, Christopher."

"Oh, I see." Christopher frowned. "Does it matter that it will have to die anyway?"

"No." Finn pressed his hands together in front of him. "To drain someone to death when they're not a threat to me or others... it's a line that I haven't crossed and I don't know if I wish to. Even if it is just a disease-spreading rat."

"Why do you need Finn to do this, Christopher? We didn't get to hear your full explanation at breakfast," Rohan said gently and put an arm around Finn's waist.

Christopher sighed, but then nodded. "In order for me to understand how Marikoth creates the undead--and, potentially, a way to prevent it from happening to anyone else--I need to compare

something killed with your Death Magic, Finn, to the undead themselves. I'm attempting to reverse-engineer the spells and potions used."

"What about a plant that Finn drains? Couldn't you use that as a comparison?" Rohan asked.

Finn looked at his stepbrother hopefully, but Christopher vigorously shook his head.

"I need to compare flesh to flesh," Christopher said. "A plant's biology is just too different from a human being's. Not that I wouldn't like to have that as well simply for study. But, in truth, the *best* comparison would be human-to-human tissue. However, I doubted that Finn would drain a prisoner."

Everyone stared at Christopher with open mouths. He shifted and looked down then back up.

"I would have only suggested a prisoner already scheduled for execution. If one has to die, let it be for the greater good," Christopher added.

Finn blinked. "Yes, yes, I see what you're saying. But while I have no problem defending myself or others with my powers, I cannot see myself draining a living human being who was simply standing there."

"Yes, I figured that was true. Hence the rat." Christopher gestured to the rat.

Everyone stared at the rat again.

"You wouldn't be asking for this if it wasn't important," Finn finally said.

"No, I have considered all other possibilities, and this is the only way," Christopher said. "Though I suppose I could do without and just theorize--"

"No, wait." Finn pinched the top of his nose.

The undead moaned and shuffled in the makeshift jail cell that Christopher was keeping them in. They were rotting where they were standing. A putrid, sickening smell wafted over from them to him. Their eyes were glazed over with the cataracts of death. Their bodies were purpling and bloating in places. Their clothes were stretched to their breaking points due to the swelling. As Finn watched, a button popped off of the male corpse's shirt and went pinging around the room.

These people had been alive not all that long ago. They had families, friends, hopes and dreams. But Marikoth had simply cut them down and used them as cannon fodder. He had not truly thought to overwhelm the castle. They were simply a distraction, a way to get Rohan into the crypt, and make his mad offer. Wasn't the death of *one* rat worth stopping the creation of more of these things out of human beings? Yes, yes, it was.

"I'll do it," Finn said firmly.

"You will?" Christopher blinked this time, clearly surprised that Finn would take this step.

"We need to stop this from happening to others. If I imagine this rat's life saving so many… how can I not take his life?" Finn asked.

"Finn, I think you're making the right decision," Rohan said.

"Aye, it's hard to hurt any living thing that doesn't have it coming, but rats… eh, we'd really have to kill it anyway" Leonid said.

"He does have an intelligent, furry face, but that just makes me think he would understand sacrificing himself for the greater good," Serxio agreed.

"I'm totally putting a very intelligent rat in your bed later," Leonid snickered.

Serxio narrowed his eyes at him. "We'll just see about that!"

Finn smiled. Their banter distracted him from what he had to do, which he had a feeling was part of the point. He drew in a deep breath and leaned down until he was at the rat's eye level. It squeaked and curled away from him at the opposite side of the cage. Finn winced, but really should he expect more?

"Thank you for your sacrifice," Finn said. "I'm not going to drain him all the way."

"But I need him to be dead. I intend to dissect him," Christopher explained.

Finn winced again for another reason, but then said, "I know. But when I truly drain something all the way it becomes… well, a grayish ash. That won't help you. If Marikoth is draining them before he turns them, he can't be doing that."

Christopher made a notation in a leather-bound notebook and nodded to himself, clearly logging this information for later.

"All right, here goes," Finn said.

He concentrated on the rat. The blue strands appeared. For a moment, he thought of communicating to the rat what was happening and why, but likely that would have just increased the creature's torment. Better to be fast and done. Finn felt the life flow out of the rat and into him. There was that familiar *rush* of delight that taking life gave him. Sickened, he turned his head away from the cage and sent this little bit of energy into Rohan and the Rirean king's runes glowed brighter through his shirt for a moment. The rat let out a high-pitched squeak and then it was dead. Rohan kissed his temple.

"Ah, interesting!" Christopher's tone showed no horror or disgust even as Leonid and Serxio looked a little wide-eyed. "I will look forward to watching you work in the field, Finn. I think there is much to learn here about Death Magic."

"Uhm, good, I guess?" Finn responded weakly, but he was actually grateful that Christopher seemed unafraid of what he had done.

"It *is* good. Imagine what a force you can be to protect those you care for," Christopher reminded him. "So much better than being weak and useless."

The last was said softly, more to himself than to them, and Finn wondered what, or *who*, his stepbrother was thinking about.

Christopher opened the cage and used a pair of tongs to remove the rat. He placed it upon a shallow, rectangular metal pan that one might use to roast vegetables in a brick oven. But there was a cork board in the center of it and pins. There was also a very sharp, narrow knife beside the pan.

"You're going to cut it open, aren't you?" Serxio sounded ill.

"Yes, and examine all the organs, the blood and other bits of tissue. I'll have to do the same with one of the undead as well," Christopher mused.

"Will you need assistance with that?" Rohan asked, surprisingly steady.

Christopher stroked his chin. "It would be useful for someone to *hold* the undead in place while I cut them."

"Ah, I--I'll help with that," Leonid volunteered, looking a little leery but willing to assist.

"That will be excellent." Christopher flashed one of his rare smiles.

"I'll stay for moral support!" Serxio volunteered.

"You can help me pin the rat," Christopher suggested.

"Oh, goody." Serxio sighed.

"How long will your investigation take, Christopher?" Finn asked, gesturing to the dead rat and the undead.

"Oh, I will need the whole day at least," Christopher murmured as he handed Leonid a broom to hold the undead with.

"Ah, so there won't be time to go see Miles together today then." Finn looked rather crestfallen.

"I'm afraid not. This is a bit more important than *Miles*." Christopher's lips twisted as if he tasted something sour when he said his brother's name.

Finn sighed. "Well--"

"Actually, it would be better if you went to see Miles tomorrow," Rohan said.

Finn blinked. "Oh, all right. Of course, if that's better for you."

"Better all around. I will have something for you by that time which will make the meeting more meaningful, depending on what you intend to do," Rohan said.

Finn's forehead furrowed. He had no idea what Rohan meant. "All right, of course."

"We'll leave you to your work, Christopher," Rohan said. Then with a grimace, he said to Finn, "You and I should go see King Tearlach."

"What if he is Marikoth? Shouldn't we be with you?" Leonid asked as he stopped in his approach towards the bars of the undead's cage.

"No, in fact, the less people with us, the better," Finn said firmly. "Marikoth can't drain me, but he can drain all of you. I'd rather not give him that opportunity."

Serxio shivered and looked at the dead rat that he was about to pin. "Quite."

"Between Finn and I, we should be safe." Rohan patted Lightbringer, which hung on his belt. Lightbringer seethed with energy and the runes all along Rohan's body gave off a soft glow that occasionally could be seen through his clothes.

"I don't think he would be foolish enough to stay here," Finn said. "The glamour doesn't last very long around me at least."

"I still don't trust Tearlach," Leonid muttered.

"Nor do I! He's most unpleasant," Serxio agreed.

"Point taken, but he might just be an unpleasant individual outside of being Marikoth," Rohan replied dryly.

"Are you going to introduce Finn to Hugues today?" Leonid asked.

Finn met the Rirean king's gaze. There were so many conflicting emotions in it. Finn was certain that at one time he would have been overjoyed to have Finn and his beloved uncle meet, but now that he knew the truth, that joy was gone.

"We should have you meet one another. If you do not mind, Finn," Rohan said.

"Of course I don't mind," Finn said agreeably.

He was curious about the man who had loved his mother, but had then watched him suffer because he could not win her for his own. That last part made his curiosity seem masochistic, but there it was. He hoped that he would see the good in Hugues, or at least, a shadow of what his mother had.

But she chose my stepfather over him. What does that say about Hugues?

"Thank you, Finn." Rohan patted his shoulder. He looked back at the others. "Do remember to surface for food."

"And drink. I'm going to need a drink after all this," Leonid muttered.

"Lots of wine. Lots and lots of wine," Serxio agreed.

Christopher said nothing as he was deep into dissection-mode. With a final wave, Rohan and Finn headed out of the laboratory.

Rohan laced the fingers of their nearest hands together as he and Finn left Christopher's laboratory. He glanced over at Finn. Despite taking the rat's life, the Fae prince seemed happy. He ran his thumb over the back of their clasped hands. Finn beamed up at him.

"I know I've said this, but I dreamed of having you here. In the castle. By my side. I still feel like I am dreaming," Rohan admitted.

Finn nodded. "You are not alone in this. To be back in Rirea but not as a servant running errands in town, but to actually *be* in Reave Castle by your side? There are no words."

Rohan grimaced at Finn's mentioning of his past life. To think that Finn had been suffering in his own kingdom and he had not even known of the young man's existence. But his uncle had. His uncle had watched as Finn had been abused.

He should not have asked Finn to meet with Hugues. Rohan realized he was still thinking of his uncle--in some small way--as still the man he had loved as a second father. But while Rohan had never thought his uncle a perfect man, the things he now knew about him--and the things he suspected--cast such a darkness upon Hugues that he was not sure what to think or do about him.

"I will insist on you seeing every inch of the castle. I want you to know it as if it were your own home," Rohan said, and he swallowed deeply. Was it that he wanted Finn to know it as *if* it were his own home or that it *was* his own home?

"I cannot wait to see it all." Finn beamed once more.

They were passing by the entrance to the crypt, and like that last time with Serxio, Rohan found his steps slowing. They stopped at the top of the stairs. There was no Marikoth down there now. It was safe.

"I wish my parents could have met you," Rohan said. "Though, now that I know they allied with Marikoth, perhaps I should not wish that. My uncomplicated memories of them are now clouded."

"They were good to you," Finn said generously. "They have not stopped being those loving parents because they are more complex in their political dealings than you knew at the time."

"How desperate would one have to be to betray a friend for Marikoth?" Rohan shook his head. "No, not desperate. True desperation hadn't set in yet. Rirea was still producing food. So greed? Was that what it was? To want a bigger kingdom? Greater riches? More subjects?"

Finn turned towards him and grasped his other hand. "I think you are the rare ruler, Rohan, who is content with his kingdom as it is. Others always want more."

"If I could but restore the land I have, Finn, I would not want an inch more. What I have is already enough, more than enough."

Finn kissed him lightly on the lips. "You are a great king, Rohan."

“I feel like a very poor one at this moment,” Rohan admitted, but hearing and seeing Finn’s belief in him was strengthening.

“Why did you go down into the crypt in the first place?” Finn asked about Rohan’s earlier visit to the depths. “Was it to search for more undead?”

“Not in the least, though it should have been, considering you found more there. But no, I wanted to see… to see if my parents had been reanimated by Marikoth,” Rohan explained.

Finn gave a visible shudder. “Oh, by the gods, I didn’t think of that! Did you find out?”

“No, Marikoth was there and you saw what happened after that.”

“Then we must look now.” Finn’s face filled with grim determination.

“Yes, we should know and there were things you wished to show me down there, too, I believe,” Rohan realized, even as his stomach flipped at the thought of looking at either an empty sarcophagus or a laden one.

Finn held up his left hand where a beautiful ring was on one finger. It started to glow a soft white color. “Amarathar, Light in the Darkness. This is what lets me kill the undead and it's better than a thousand candles.”

“It has a fitting name.” Rohan caught that hand and kissed it.

While he had no magical jewels to give Finn, there were others--family treasures--that he so wished to give him. For a moment, Rohan imagined Finn dressed in the rich crimsons and golds of the De Clares with one of the royal crowns around his noble brow. He could see it so clearly. His heart thudded heavily in his chest. He could ask Finn to marry him now. He believed that Finn would say yes. But if he did, there would be war. So he remained silent.

“Come, I know we are to see King Tearlach, but I would have us explore the catacombs a bit,” Finn said, having no idea where Rohan’s thoughts had gone.

Rohan cleared his throat. “Yes, of course.”

The two of them went down those fateful steps together. Rohan’s free hand closed around Lightbringer’s hilt. The magic within him and the blade were as one and they *surged*. How different any encounter would be with an enemy now! With Finn by his side, they were formidable.

Rohan moved cautiously forward, but Finn strode ahead confidently. If Marikoth were there, Finn would know. Rohan allowed himself to be led to the second room where his parent’s joint sarcophagus lay.

“Is that them?” Finn asked, gesturing to a white stone sarcophagus that had two figures carved from stone lying side by side on the lid.

Rohan nodded. Words escaped him now. It looked undisturbed so didn’t that mean they were safe? Their souls, of course, had already joined the river, so yes, they were safe. Their bodies were the only things left behind. Those were not his parents, he reminded himself, merely shells.

“The artist was quite skilled,” Finn remarked as he stepped towards the sarcophagus. “They appear to be sleeping. Are they a good likeness?”

Rohan nodded again. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. Finn took another step forward, but Rohan hung back.

“The sarcophagus does not appear disturbed,” Finn echoed what he had thought. “But, I suppose Marikoth would not like us to guess his plan before he was ready to spring it. So the only way to tell for sure is to look inside.”

The Fae prince turned towards him when he tried to take that final step to the sarcophagus and Rohan balked. Finn studied him with compassion filling that beautiful face.

“I will look,” Finn said. “You stay where you are.”

"I cannot ask that of you."

"You do not have to. Stay there, Rohan. I will see," Finn told him.

Finn released Rohan's hand after a final squeeze. Rohan worried that the sarcophagus' lid would be too heavy for Finn to move. But, again, all words were stolen from him by a terrible grief and horror. Had Marikoth brought his parents' bodies back as weapons against him?

There was a grinding sound as the sarcophagus lid slid to the side. Rohan's eyes widened as he smelled magic in the air. Finn clearly didn't realize it, but he was using magic to augment his physical strength. Once the lid was open far enough for Finn to see inside, the Fae prince paused. The hand that bore Amarathar dipped from sight as Finn lowered it into the sarcophagus.

"Ah, they are here, Rohan. Undisturbed," Finn said. "Marikoth did not use them."

Rohan sagged and covered his face with his hands. Though his memories of them were now complicated with new information, he still loved them. Even though their souls were long gone from these withered husks, he could not bear the thought of them being used in an attack against the people of Rirea.

There was a grinding sound as Finn brought the lid back into place. He turned around to face Rohan. He was smiling tenderly. Rohan moved without thought or speech. He cupped Finn's face and kissed him, long and deep, until they both needed air. Then he rested their foreheads together.

"Thank you, Finn. I thought I could do that, but I…"

"That is one of the joys of being together, Rohan. We no longer have to face things on our own," Finn answered.

Rohan kissed him again and again until Finn was laughing. He curled against Rohan's chest. Rohan held him tightly. How could he ever let Finn go again? He couldn't. He simply couldn't.

"You wanted to show me a rather spectacular mural, yes?" Rohan finally asked.

He found himself in no great rush to see Tearlach. Even though the catacombs were far from pleasant, the thought of meeting with the Achuvien king held even less delight.

"I do. And there were some rooms I passed on the way that I wanted to look into," Finn said.

"Rooms?" Rohan's eyebrows lifted.

"Did you never explore here as a child? Somehow I can't imagine you not doing so," Finn said almost shyly.

"I was afraid of this place when I was little. I believed in ghosts," Rohan admitted with a laugh. "And then after my parents died, I had no desire to explore. But you are right, I think if they hadn't passed away, I would have gotten my courage up to come down here. Considering all that has occurred, I wish I had."

Finn didn't look disappointed to have been wrong at all. "Then we get to experience these things together for the first time."

Finn linked their hands and started to lead Rohan beyond his parent's crypt. Cold air scented with the sea whispered past them. He knew Leonid had sent Guards down here to block the secret door into the castle that Marikoth had forced. It was but a temporary solution, Leonid had said at breakfast.

"The damned doors are huge and likely beyond our people's skills to repair," Leonid had explained. "But they managed to wedge them closed for now. I've asked about town to find a blacksmith or carpenter who might have some knowledge. I'll get back to you on that as soon as I know."

"We must get it fixed and quickly," Rohan had agreed.

"It's like our pants are hanging open in the back and a cold wind is coming," Leonid had laughed.

As he and Finn followed the sloping hallway, the sense of great age weighed on Rohan, yet it felt strangely familiar, too, despite him never having been here and it being quite a bit different than the castle above. He ran his hands along the smooth, cold stone almost as if tracing a path he had taken often. Finn allowed Amarathar to burn brightly so it was easy to see, but both of them did not behave as if this place were altogether new to them. Finn had been there once, but still.

"Does this place seem familiar to you?" Finn asked, echoing his own thoughts again.

"Yes, though I am no stone mason, I feel as if I built this place," Rohan agreed.

"The Aeturnals actually created the buildings they lived in with magic. Silver Soul confirmed that they had built the base of Reave Castle, if nothing else," Finn said.

"Could there be some kind of blood memory, do you suppose?" Rohan asked. "Remembering somehow what our ancestors did?"

"That could be. Or perhaps more," Finn breathed.

He had stopped outside of a set of doors. Through them was complete darkness. The darkness was so deep that not even Amarathar pierced far within it. There were steps leading down. Rohan noted that the doors that had covered this threshold were broken. The latch was twisted back. It looked like fresh damage, but it was hard to tell. Had Marikoth done this? Had an ancestor of his done it?

"Here… here was where I felt being watched before," Finn said. "I think we should go inside."

Rohan unsheathed Lightbringer. The runes flared hotly and illuminated another slice of the darkness. If Finn truly had been watched from here, the sword would let their enemies know that they were coming, but Rohan had no fear. With Lightbringer in his hand and Finn beside him, he felt sure and powerful.

The two of them went inside and followed a long set of steps that led far beneath the lowest levels of Reave Castle. Rohan heard the faint drip of water and smelled old, wet stone. But there was also another scent. It was the bitter, ozone scent of magic. Was it from those who had carved this place from the stone or had Marikoth lingered down here more recently?

They reached the bottom stair and their final footsteps echoed. This space was far larger than the stairwell. Rohan turned his head to the side and listened intently. Water dripping. Stone creaking. Nothing alive made any sounds, but them. Finn murmured something and Amarathar burned brighter. The small circle of light expanded, nearly exploding outwards, to illuminate the whole space. Finn gasped. Rohan's mouth fell open.

The room was huge, stretching all around them for hundreds of feet in all directions. The ceiling soared two storeys above their heads. Shelves lined the walls. Tomes, scrolls and other books looked to have survived the ages. If Marikoth had come down here, perhaps this was where he had learned of the Aeturnals and their Bonded Ones' fates. For Rohan was certain that was who was buried here. For this was a tomb for two people. In the very center of the room, on a raised dais, were two sarcophagi with figures too far away to see clearly, but Rohan's chest seized.

"It's us," Finn whispered.

"What?"

"I mean… I don't know. It's the last Aeturnal and his bonded one." Finn turned towards Rohan. "I feel it."

"I know. Like we've been here before. Come, let us look at their faces. I would know…" He did not finish that statement though as he was not sure what he wished to confirm.

The two of them walked, hand in hand, up the dais broad marble steps and stood at the foot of each sarcophagus. One of the stone figures was dressed in armor with a sword placed over his chest.

"Lightbringer," Rohan whispered.

He tightened his hand around the blade and thought he felt a sympathetic pulse flow through it to him. He stepped closer to look at the figure's face. It was not his. Not exactly. There were pointed ears that appeared through some of the locks of hair and, though the eyes were closed shut on the statue and all was done in white, he was certain that the original had red eyes. But the world turned too fast under his feet for a moment, for he thought remembered this face nonetheless. He had seen it looking at himself in a mirror. Finn held him near.

"It's you," Finn whispered.

"An ancestor, to be sure," Rohan said.

"No, it's *you*," Finn sounded so certain.

The Fae prince went over to the figure and carefully brushed his fingers over the marble cheek. When Finn looked up at him, there were tears in his eyes. Finn covered his mouth and Rohan went to him, cradling him against his chest.

"I know that you are here," Finn got out. "But, for a moment, I thought what it would be like if you were… gone and--"

"I am not going anywhere."

Finn buried his face in Rohan's neck and trembled for long moments. Rohan stroked his back. Without letting Finn go and with great reluctance, Rohan turned his head to look at the figure on the other sarcophagus. His breath caught in his throat and tears burned in his eyes.

The figure was a Fae dressed in mage's robes with a glorious staff by his side. His face was delicate yet masculine. He looked peaceful, as if asleep. Though it was not *exactly* Finn's face, the similarities were unmistakable. This was Finn's ancestor.

But no, more than that. It's Finn. Just like this is me. By the Gods, we lived and loved before.

"Marikoth must have seen these, but he still sought to take you from me," Finn's voice was blurred by tears and being stuffed against his neck. His fingers dug into Rohan's back. "He knows we're meant to be together. He knows that this is our fate and happiness, but he would take it."

"He cannot take anything from us, especially not me from you, Finn. I am yours. I have *always* been yours," Rohan stated.

But he felt that some of Finn's shivers came from anger now and he hated that Marikoth had made Finn believe--if only for a second--that he could replace Finn in Rohan's life or heart.

"He showed me another dream just before I got to you," Finn said. "One where the three of us were family. You and I were married. He was an indulgent, loving uncle and teacher. Yet he thought to--"

"He is a desperate and unhappy creature, Finn," Rohan soothed his lover, even as his heart leaped at Finn speaking of them being married, if only in a dream. "If he, indeed, saw this, then everything he's ever believed about himself must have come crashing down. He is a Death Mage without an Aeturnal. You have all he wants."

"You sound like you pity him."

"In a way, I do, but he has made choices that have sundered him from the rest of human and Fae-kind," Rohan said.

"There are times when I feel as you do and others where I loathe him," Finn admitted. "But I know that holding hatred inside is like keeping acid in a cup. The cup is what suffers."

"Very wise words."

"My mother would often tell me that." Finn sniffled and pulled back from Rohan's chest. "When I thought I was being watched, I wonder if it was Marikoth down here while he let that undead

glamourized version of him amble ahead."

"It appears that some of the scrolls are missing from that wall," Rohan said and pointed.

It was then that the two of them noticed the ceiling. How they had missed the hundreds of carved figures just showed how the sarcophagi had mesmerized them.

"By the gods! It's a war scene. The two of us!" Finn pointed upwards at the mirror images of the two people on the sarcophagi, but now, not asleep, but brilliantly awake.

"We were leading humans *and* Fae!" Rohan realized as he took in the detailed figures far above their heads.

"Look at who they are fighting!" Finn cried and he lifted the hand that was graced with Amarathar so that the light was greater. "They're--they're--"

"It is the Dreadbrood, or that is the nearest translation to Common I can provide," Tearlach's voice rose up behind them.

Rohan had already been turning as Tearlach and his uncle exited the stairs. Both carried gems instead of torches that lit up with an icy white light, not unlike Amarathar. His uncle's eyes went to the ceiling with a gasp.

"To think this has been here all this time! Behind those doors that none could open!" Hugues breathed.

So it was Marikoth down here.

"What are you both doing here?" Rohan asked, adjusting his grip on Lightbringer, not certain that either were friendly.

"We were looking for you! Since you did not come and see how your *poisoned* guest was doing, I thought I would report to you myself on my improvement," Tearlach said. "Your uncle was good enough to assist me in dealing with your Guard to get here. They were quite intent on trying to keep me where I no longer wished to be."

Rohan's gaze swung towards his uncle. His anger rose, but then he realized that he had not told Hugues about Christopher seeing Tearlach in the lower levels just before the attack. Finn regarded both Tearlach and his uncle curiously, but with no fear or tension. Neither was Marikoth then in a glamour.

"I was worried about you, nephew! No one would tell me your status after the attack," Hugues said, dragging his eyes away from the ceiling to him.

A guilty stab went through Rohan. "I am sorry, Uncle. Much has occurred and I should have alerted you to it. But… I was indisposed for a time."

"This seems to be a common occurrence in Reave Castle!" Tearlach chuckled. "At least it is not boring here. So! Did you poison me, dear Rohan?"

"Of course not!" Rohan heard the affront in his own voice.

"True! I do not think you did. The poison is not your style. A sword in the gut in single combat? Yes, that would be you, but not the sneaking around and poisoning," Tearlach said, looking absurdly pleased for a man having been poisoned.

"Were you down in the lower levels this morning?" Finn asked.

Tearlach swung his big body towards Finn and acted as if he were seeing the slender Fae prince for the first time. But Rohan knew better. Tearlach saw everything.

"No, little one, I was *indisposed* much like dear Rohan here," Tearlach answered. "But you already know that, because if you thought I was Marikoth you would be acting quite a bit differently, yah? To think he has the balls to pretend to be me!" Tearlach slapped a hand against his massive chest. "That bastard Fae!" He spit on the ground.

"King Tearlach, Uncle Hugues, this is Prince Finrael Ravenspar," Rohan introduced them.

Hugues' gaze darted to Finn. Was that guilt Rohan saw in his eyes or was he only hoping it was. "Welcome to Reave Castle, Prince Ravenspar."

"Thank you, Lord De Clare," Finn said evenly.

The two stared at one another as if taking each other's measure. They said nothing though. In the end, his uncle looked away as if he could not bear to gaze upon Finn any longer.

Tearlach stroked his chin. "The son of our enemy?"

"My father is not your enemy!" Finn replied a little hotly. "He is not the cause of the blight on this land or any other. We thought it was Marikoth, but--"

"It is more complicated than that, I think, too." It was Hugues who had completed Finn's sentence.

His uncle had drifted further inside of the room. He came up to the dais beside them and stared at the two figures on the sarcophagi. His uncle's eyes flitted to them then away. So it was not just Finn and himself who saw the resemblance.

"The last Aeturnal and his Bonded One." Hugues reverently moved his hands over the figure that looked like Rohan, but didn't touch it. "Laid to rest here after they were betrayed by the gods themselves."

And now we are returned, Rohan found himself thinking.

"What is the Dreadbrood, King Tearlach?" Finn asked

"A myth. A legend. Or let us hope so. It is the army of the God of Death!" Tearlach explained.

Rohan looked up at the ceiling again. The opposing army was made up of monsters and the dead. There were skeletal archers and fierce swordsmen. There were ravenous wolves the size of Tyreon, but not kind at all. There were other twisted things with flaming eyes and hatred stamped on their faces. That was the army that the Aeturnal and his Bonded One faced. That was the one that had taken their lives.

"God of Death?" Finn looked pale for a moment. "I do not think so. The God of Death wouldn't attack a Bonded One."

"Why not?" Tearlach asked curiously.

"Bonded Ones are Death Mages. We--we have a connection to the God of Death," Finn explained, looking rattled.

Rohan wondered what it was that had upset Finn so. He would find out later when they were alone.

"The tales tell that the Dreadbrood is the God of Death's army, but this army was stolen from the god by a Necromancer and wielded for their own purposes," Tearlach explained. "Well, so they say."

"It is more than just saying, Tearlach. This place proves it," Rohan said.

Tearlach shrugged. "Many tombs celebrate battles that never were. This could simply be to make your ancestors look better."

"They wouldn't do that. This space… it's sacred. They wouldn't make things up here," Finn insisted.

Rohan put a hand on Finn's shoulder. "I agree with you. Though this Dreadbrood adds a dimension that none of the books I've read--or tales I've heard--mentions. I am curious to learn more about them and this Necromancer."

"I am happy to tell tales, but not on an empty stomach." Tearlach patted his flat belly. "Let us go upstairs. Shake the bone dust from our clothes. I will tell you all you wish to know."

Rohan's gaze swept the sepulchral space. He was suddenly eager to get out of there as well. He

wanted sunlight--as faint as it might be--and air clean of death. The other mural that Finn had wished to show him could wait. The books and scrolls, too, could be perused later in depth. Besides, he had seen all he needed to see to know that some of the tales, at least, were true.

"Finn, is that agreeable to you?" Rohan asked.

Finn nodded.

"Uncle, will you not join us?" Rohan's voice rose to reach the older man who was crouched by the sarcophagi.

Hugues waved a hand, but did not draw his gaze away from the figures. "I will join you in a bit."

Rohan frowned but said, "Do not tarry here overlong, Uncle. This place is… not safe."

Hugues did not respond, perhaps not hearing him or simply ignoring him. Rohan took Finn's hand and the two of them and Tearlach left the tomb and his uncle behind.

Watching Tearlach eat food was a fascinating and horrifying experience, Finn decided. The three of them were seated at a round table out in the rose garden. Rohan had explained his grandmother had planted most of the plants and, though Rirea was failing, there were still a few blooms that let out soft, sweet scents. However, there was one large bush that clearly had been the queen of the group that was now simply bare, black branches. In between watching Tearlach eat, Finn had stared at that bush and wondered if he couldn't make it bloom like he had Tanglewood.

"Another roast chicken, King Tearlach?" Rohan asked dryly.

That's his fourth. How could he eat anymore? Finn wondered. *Well, he is huge. Perhaps he stores the food in his legs?*

It was lucky that neither of them were eating--they were still full from breakfast--because Finn was pretty certain that there wouldn't have been enough to satisfy the Achuvien king and anyone else.

Tearlach belched. It echoed in the stone walled rose garden. "Ah, now I have room. Delicious!"

Tearlach tossed the chicken bone, that he had cleaned thoroughly of flesh, over his shoulder towards two very large, black hounds that had arrived that morning with more of his warriors. There were growls from each hound as they dove for the bone at the same time. When they saw each other going for the same bony morsel they decided that ripping each other's throats out was better than any old chicken bone.

"Tifor! Galug! Here's another bone! Stop fighting!" Tearlach commanded and tossed a whole chicken carcass to them.

The huge black hounds still growled but they crunched their bones and were quieter. Bloodshed had been avoided.

"You were going to tell us about the Dreadbrood, King Tearlach," Finn prompted as the Achuvien king stripped the flesh from another chicken leg with his strong white teeth.

"Yes, yes, but these are only fairy stories, remember? They are not *real*. I think we all would have noticed an army made up of monsters parading through our lands no matter how long it has been since they did so!" Tearlach chuckled.

He had a point, but then again, the Aeturnal and Death Mage history had mostly been lost--or obscured--so couldn't the Dreadbrood have also been forgotten? Perhaps the God of Death had sent it to destroy the Aeturnal and his Bonded One so that the people worshipped it instead of them. Was that not possible? It would take a great evil--and a greater fear--for people to send away the Aeturnals as their rulers after millennia of peace and prosperity.

"That carving on the ceiling would seem to indicate otherwise," Finn began.

"I still think it was merely to puff up what killed those ancient kings!" Tearlach chuckled in between licking his grease-slicked fingers clean. Seeing something in Finn's face, he added, "Or maybe it was a warning."

"A warning?" Rohan frowned as he sipped a glass of wine.

"Of a battle to come." Tearlach lifted his massive shoulders in a shrug. "I am not blind. Those dead ones looked like the two of you. So maybe this isn't a battle that occurred, but one that *you* will face."

Finn's eyes widened in alarm. Rohan looked thoughtful, pursing his lips.

"Marikoth said that he is not the cause of the death and decay we see in Rirea and elsewhere," Rohan pointed out.

"He would say anything! A liar," Tearlach muttered, and from the bitterness with which he said those words, Finn wondered if Tearlach had been personally wronged by him.

Rohan did tell me that Marikoth was his court magician for a time, Finn pondered. *Though I can hardly imagine Marikoth serving anyone at all. Still, when he started out, he wasn't like he is now. Yet Tearlach is human, and those Achuviens may live long, surely they don't live long enough for Tearlach to have met Marikoth right after his exile.*

"While I don't disagree with you," Rohan said carefully, "I did feel he was telling me the truth this time."

"So you think the Dreadbrood is the cause of all our problems?" Tearlach looked amused.

Finn was unnerved by this possibility. He hadn't yet had a chance to explain to Rohan about the raven claiming to be the very God of Death that helmed this Dreadbrood, or that Finn was it's Chosen. Why would it have made Finn it's Chosen when his goal was to restore Rirea if its own army was the cause of this decay?

"I don't know enough about it to know, or even guess, anything about this Dreadbrood," Rohan admitted.

"I admit that it is a strange tomb down there." Tearlach pursed his lips.

"Why do you say that?" Finn asked.

"The books. Who leaves a library in a tomb?" Tearlach asked.

The Achuvien king ripped off another chicken leg from the roast bird. Glistening juices oozed over the plate. He sopped those up with a thick, crusty piece of bread. He chewed chicken and bread together contemplatively.

Finn frowned. Tearlach had a point. Who left books in a tomb? Rohan had told him that the castle had extensive libraries so why keep them there?

Finn offered lamely, "Perhaps they valued learning and--"

"Bah! People who value learning do not put books in a tomb! They keep them carefully in temperature controlled libraries! No, those were left there so that they would be kept safe and not pilfered over the centuries," Tearlach said. Then he laughed again, showing teeth with chicken and bread between them. "At least that is my guess."

Finn turned in his chair to face Rohan. "So we should be reading those books right now."

Rohan nodded. "Uncle Hugues is still down there. He might have something to report."

"I doubt you'd be able to decipher them on your own." Tearlach chuckled again.

"Why? Rohan knows Fae and--"

"I cast a glance at those spines on the books. Perhaps the Aeturnals' mother tongue was Fae, but that is not what they wrote those in," Tearlach said as he picked his teeth with a slender chicken bone.

"You really *do* see everything, Tearlach. I didn't notice you looking at any of the books," Rohan murmured.

"One must have eyes in the back of one's head to long rule the Achuviens. We pick our leaders by strength *and* guile," Tearlach explained. "Why the poison did not send me to an eternal rest is because from birth we are reared on them. We ingest small amounts of all the deadly ones and by adulthood, we are mostly immune to their effects."

Finn shivered.

"That distresses you, Fae prince?" Tearlach lifted an eyebrow.

"Your homeland sounds like a *hard* place," Finn said carefully. He meant more than hard. It sounded horrific.

Tearlach nodded. "It is. The people reflect its landscape. The Achuviel Kingdom is the last place where life should be, but we survive."

Tifor and Galug were whining softly on either side of Tearlach's chair. He patted one of their large heads.

"So, if they aren't in a Fae dialect, what are the books written in?" Rohan asked.

"Can't you guess?" Tearlach was chuckling.

"Achuvien?" Finn asked.

Tearlach pointed the bone at him. "Correct! An ancient version of my people's tongue!"

Rohan was frowning now. "The Achuviens and the Aeturnals are related somehow then?"

Another massive shrug. "I am guessing here, but I would say that the Aeturnals did not just disappear after they left the Empire. They likely fled and intermarried. Not even their enemies would follow them to the Achuviel Kingdom."

"So much of our history has been lost," Finn murmured.

"Purposefully," Rohan added. "I found several books in my uncle's library that speak of the purposeful obliterating of the Aeturnals' history for the fear the gods might take notice of us again."

"And it's been all replaced by nonsense! Like the tales of the Dreadbrood," Tearlach said.

"Nonsense or not, please tell us of the Dreadbrood," Finn requested.

"Ach, you ask so prettily, how can I resist? No wonder my Rohan likes you so well!" Tearlach gave a rather leering smile at Rohan.

Rohan remained stone-faced while Finn blinked at the use of the word "my" in regards to the Rirean king. He was not jealous in any way or worried that Rohan could somehow favor Tearlach over him. He wasn't even certain if Tearlach meant what he was saying or was just teasing Rohan. It felt a little bit put on, but Finn wasn't sure.

"Tearlach. Stories. Now." Rohan looked stern.

Tearlach tented his fingers beneath his grizzled chin. "Let us see, let us see. It all begins with the Achuviel Kingdom, as all things do! For you see, my land is said to sit on the edge of the Neverworld, the abode of Death, which is why life struggles there."

Finn found himself imagining what Tearlach was saying. The Achuvien king painted a picture of a windswept, rocky country with huge mountains that sometimes belched fire and smoke that darkened the sky. There were large clefts in these mountains that led down, down, down to unknown depths where the mad said the God of Death chanted, laughed and raved.

The people who existed there eked out a living on their stony land where only stunted root vegetables grew and animals pared down to bone and sinew roamed. It was a land where to be out under the unending, open sky was to be watched. Wyverns made their homes in the mountains and would carry off the unwary to be food for them and their young. There was little to recommend the

place. In fact, anyone with half a mind would flee it for not that far away lay a paradise.

This paradise was a land of milk and honey. A land of eternal people of endless beauty who sang as they tilled their fields as if it was no work to draw out vegetables and grain from the fertile ground. This land was thick with forests and cities filled with learned mages, artisans and nobles. There was no want there. Finn interpreted this to be the Empire, though it was not given a name in Tearlach's story.

Despite this bountiful land not so far away, the Achuvians did not dare set foot in that place for wherever they went they brought death. Step on a field full of waving golden grain and it would be turned to black ash. Place a hand on the trunk of a golden-barked tree and its limbs would wither and its roots would draw out of the ground until it fell over, a lifeless husk. Dare to kiss one of the eternal people and their immortality would drain away and they, too, would die. Finn felt a strange coiling of unease in him as these characteristics were of Death Mages, of him!

"You are creatures of Death! We are the beloved beings of Life!" Those eternal people cried, pointing fingers at the Achuviens. "You are not welcome here! Our god has forbidden it! Try to set foot in our lands again and we will destroy you!"

And these people of paradise kept their word. Whenever an Achuvien dared to venture beyond their borders, they would be struck down. This went on for millennia. Yet the Achuviens--who had so little--continued to survive and to grow bitter with watching those around them with so much.

One day, a young man was born--sickly and stunted and doomed to die--near one of the vents where the God of Death was often heard singing. The babe was left outside, right outside that fiery hole. There was not enough food to spare on one who would not live to see his first birthday. But the God of Death heard this babe's cries and ventured out to see what was so very near to it. The God of Death saw the child and made a decision--perhaps of malice or sympathy, one does not know--that it would raise this boy as its own.

And so the child that was not destined to live, did live under the careful tutelage of the God of Death. He became strong and learned all he could from Death of the greater world and the magics in it. He also became bitter. Not only was he an Achuvien who was shunned by all beyond their borders, but he was shunned by his own people as well because Death's stamp was upon him. He wanted revenge upon all the world.

He begged his father Death to give him control of the Dreadbrood, Death's great army, to take it beyond the Achuviel Kingdom's borders and use it against the other peoples who had so much and worshipped other gods. But Death had no interest in doing this. It was said that it had meddled once with the God of Life and disaster had struck. The Achuviel Kingdom was its land. Its empire. All it wanted was this terrible place with its hardened people. Other gods had those other lands. And so it would not interfere. But the child it had raised into a man, wanted more.

So the man stole Death's great crown and named himself the Necromancer. With that crown he was able to command the Dreadbrood. He swept out of the Achuviel Kingdom and wherever he went, wherever the Dreadbrood marched, the land poisoned and died. At first, this pleased the Necromancer because the Achuviens had nothing, and now, his enemies had nothing as well!

But that pleasure only lasted so far before frustration set in, because though he had an army that could destroy any enemy, it gained him *nothing*. No land to give to the people of his home. No spoils of war to prove to them he was a worthy leader. He could not even make slaves of the people of paradise he conquered, because those that did not die in battle died afterwards of starvation as there was nothing to eat.

"How are you enjoying your pyrrhic victory, my child?" Death asked.

"You tricked me into believing that I could win!" the Necromancer cried.

"No, you tricked *yourself*. For all you can do is linked to me. I bring no life to the fields or breath to a newborn babe. I usher everything living to decay and disappear. I am the last touch any will feel. I am the end of all things," Death answered.

"So there is no victory then? No way I can help my people or myself?" the Necromancer pleaded.

"We are necessary for much that lives must die to make room for what is next, or life will choke itself out," Death answered.

"Yet they do not want us in the land of plenty! They chase us away! They offer us nothing!" the Necromancer roared.

"Just wait. They will need us. And I will send my Chosen to them," Death said. "Then we shall be worshipped and rewarded even in the land of plenty."

"But what of me? Will I be your Chosen?" the Necromancer asked as he clutched Death's Crown to his head.

"No," Death intoned. "You wanted to ride ahead of the Dreadbrood so much that you betrayed me, but let it not be said I am not merciful. You will be the Dreadbrood's general forevermore."

And Death sent his army back into the ground with the worms and the dirt. The Necromancer's screams were choked off as he, too, was swallowed by the ground. It is said the Dreadbrood waits beneath the earth for the Chosen to come and call it.

"And this is why the Achuviel Kingdom has not come and conquered you all!" Tearlach laughed and slapped his thigh. "Too bad, because our land is nearly barren and we could use some better territory."

"So the story is to explain why the Achuviens haven't conquered the rest of the world?" Rohan asked.

Tearlach shrugged. "That is how I always interpreted it. After all, unlike your pretty prince here, I do not bring death with a touch!"

Tearlach brushed a finger over the nearest rose. Nothing happened. But still, Finn was unnerved. The mention of Death's Chosen and the description of what this chosen person could do sounded exactly like himself. Well, through a glass darkly.

Or more like Marikoth. I wonder if he heard the story and went to the Achuviel Kingdom to find out if it was true.

"Death's Chosen," Finn said the words and his eyes moved towards where a bird alighted on a nearby branch. It was *not* the raven, but just a normal finch. "Why was this future person called that?"

Another shrug. "Because Death would choose them to wield the great Dreadbrood! Why else?"

"And what would they do with the Dreadbrood?" Finn pressed.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Hopefully, make the land of milk and honey share a bit," Tearlach explained. "The God of Death seemed to think it would lead to it being worshipped more."

"Do you think that Death's Chosen is a pawn in all of this?" Finn asked.

"Aren't we all pawns of the gods? If they exist, they are beyond our understanding," Tearlach answered, unmoved. "But, like I said, this is all a fairy story. There is no Dreadbrood army deep in the ground of the Achuviel Kingdom, because I would have found it!"

"Would you have used it, Tearlach?" Rohan asked dryly.

"Eh, you would not have had to worry if I did. You are hardly better off than we are. And the Wall would have stopped me anyways from getting to the one place that has more than it needs," Tearlach answered with a grin. "I suppose that means I would have used it against *you*, Finreal, if I could. But I am betting Finreal would like to feed the world, wouldn't he, Rohan?"

Rohan put an arm around Finn's shoulders. "The world would be a better place if people such as Finn did run things."

"Ah, and considering he can drain the life out of anyone or anything that doesn't agree with him means he could actually hold that position!" Tearlach threw back his head and laughed loudly. "I thought that Marikoth was the only one of you, Finrael. He certainly believed he was the only one. But here you are. How interesting! And you weren't tossed out on your pretty ass or killed by the Ravenspars! More interesting!"

"Tearlach," Rohan's voice dipped warningly.

"Do you know *why* Death Mages are really killed, Finreal?" Tearlach asked as he stretched out in his chair.

"N-no, but I would imagine our gifts frighten people and might lead to…" *insanity, mass death,* were some of the words that echoed in Finn's mind, but he said simply, "issues."

"Marikoth told me when he was deep in his cups one night." Tearlach drained a huge mug of wine and smacked his lips. "His daddy informed him that he was destined to bring down the whole of the Empire!"

"He was? Or a… a *Death Mage* was?" Finn asked, feeling a trickle of unease.

"Who knows! But the point being is that the real reason that the Ravenspars get rid of some of their family members is to keep *power*," Tearlach answered. "However they dress it up, you Death Mages must be more powerful than any of them so they get rid of you early. They cling to that throne instead."

Finn thought of how Marikoth had portrayed him as someone who would never stand up to Thalanil, let alone take the throne from him. He likely thought that was why Thalanil hadn't killed Finn or exiled him rather than the fact that his father simply loved him.

"And if they keep killing the Death Mages then they will never lose their power! You see? Marikoth's father took a risk by just exiling him. But Thalanil," Tearlach wagged a finger at him, "has made quite the leap by keeping you as his son and the Empire's prince. I wonder what the other Ravenspars will say about that."

Finn stilled as he thought of his father going to see his grandfather right now. What would his grandfather advise when Thalanil told him about Finn? He'd exiled Marikoth, unable to kill him because he loved him, but Thalanil wanted to present Finn to the Empire! Would his grandfather support that after he'd tossed his own son away? No. He likely wouldn't.

And what about the other Ravenspars, the ones that would rule after Thalanil when the gods allegedly willed it? What would *they* advise about Finn, or more importantly, what would they *do*? Not to mention if he and Rohan came to Thalanil with this insane-sounding idea that *they* needed to rule the Empire and Rirea! Oh, that wouldn't do at all, Finn guessed.

Rohan stroked his back. Finn realized that the Rirean king had likely come to these same conclusions.

"It looks like Thalanil wants to find out! What an interesting Fae! But he produced such an interesting son!" Tearlach added and banged a hand on the table. The dogs whined and he said, "My poor babies! You are still starved. We will have to go hunting this afternoon!"

"There is no game in the woods worth catching, Tearlach," Rohan warned. "We are reduced to what we can import and the fish in the sea that we catch."

Tearlach got up from the table, brushing away stray bits of chicken from his doublet. "Ah, we will find something. Maybe some more undead. I am feeling the need to kill since I missed out on this morning's excitement." With a broad, dead white smile, Tearlach added, "Don't you worry, Rohan, I

will amuse myself.”

THE SCENT OF ROSES

With Tearlach and his noisy hounds gone, the rose garden was finally the tranquil place it usually was and Rohan let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Finn stood up from his seat and began to pile the dishes together for the staff. Rohan thought to tell him to stop, that he didn't need to do that, but Finn was well aware he didn't. He was simply *helping*. So Rohan started to do the same. The staff, who had been out of sight from them, but not out of sight of the table, leaped forward.

"My king! Prince Finrael! We will do that!" Katie, a young woman with dark brown eyes and a mop of curls, cried.

"It's all right," Finn assured her. "King Tearlach is a good eater. He left hardly anything."

Katie beamed. "Yes, he was. Cook Shelton will be pleased."

"She is the best," Rohan agreed.

"That she is!" Katie started to quickly take a load of plates into her arms and looked at them hopefully.

"Thank you, Katie, for all you do. We'll leave you to your work," Rohan said.

He put an arm around Finn's waist and urged the young man away from the table. While to Finn it might seem like helping, they were clearly making Katie uneasy. Surprisingly, Finn took the lead and brought him over to the dead grand rose bush.

"Last year it flowered a little. But this year…" Rohan didn't complete the sentence. It was too painful and Finn understood. This bush had flowered every year like clockwork. It had been his mother's favorite and the scent of its roses always reminded him of her. Now it stood there dead and gone.

"Perhaps we could bring it back," Finn suggested. "I quickened Tanglewood, maybe you and I could bring this back."

"What if it is completely dead? Could we bring something like that back?" Rohan frowned, a little uneasy at the thought of bringing back even fully dead plants.

"I don't know. Christopher would be quite cross with us that we haven't experimented and found out what we can do," Finn said. "I was thinking just that thing when coming for you. That I needed to know more about how to control my powers. I had hoped that my--my grandfather would have some ideas, but…"

Rohan frowned. "Yes, I see why you hoped that, but now you are not so certain."

"I feel so foolish for not considering that other Ravenspars are waiting in the wings to be king or queen of the Empire!" Finn let out a bitter laugh. "Even if Thalanil agreed to us taking over, what about them?"

"Indeed, it is the curse of immortality. The other Ravenspars have not passed away. They are simply waiting for their turn," Rohan agreed. "But perhaps they won't find the thought of our ruling so objectionable as you and I are mortal--"

Finn shook his head. "No, I'm not. Father confirmed that. I won't grow much older outwardly before I *set*. And you," here Finn stared up at him, "you may be immortal, too. As the Heir, and if we were to rule from Aymar where time is different…"

Finn let that sentence hang and Rohan blinked. Finn was immortal. He would not age. He would not die. And Rohan might be, too? But what if he wasn't? Then Finn would stay a youth while he grew decrepit and… he stopped that line of thought. It was not useful. As it was now, they both could die at any moment if they had to fight Marikoth.

"Another thing that our conversation with Tearlach has revealed to me is something very strange and disturbing. Rohan, I do not know what it means," Finn said. "Death's Chosen… that's who I am."

"What?" Rohan exclaimed.

Finn then explained everything that had happened with the raven, what the bird--or *god*--had said, and how he got the title.

"The God of Death has helped me. Helped *us*. Everything we've learned about the past suggests that the gods cursed us. But Death is now *helping* us. And Tearlach said that Death's Chosen would lead the Dreadbrood when the land needed it. Perhaps like now? When life is strangling itself in the Empire?"

"Could it be? It seems to fit." Rohan frowned deeply. "Finn, you said your magic *couldn't* work against the undead."

"No, whatever magic infects them is an anathema to me," Finn answered. "These undead aren't part of the Dreadbrood, are they? Perhaps the army is made rather than kept somewhere? But these modern undead look quite different from the ones in the tomb and are rather… well, useless unless you are careless like I was and come to be surrounded by them. It's hardly an *army* of soldiers."

"These new undead don't resemble the creatures in the tomb at all other than that they both are seemingly undead," Rohan agreed. "But I was just thinking that an undead army would be the only one that would work *against* a Death Mage."

"Oh, I see!" Finn's eyes widened and his mouth opened. "Yes, yes, it would. Oh, what does this mean?"

"We do not even know if the Dreadbrood truly exists, let alone is something you could control or anyone could control. This bird could be lying about what it is," Rohan pointed out. "I hate to say it, but Tearlach is right that all we have are fairy tales and potentially misunderstood history."

Finn leaned against him. Rohan stroked his hair.

"We should go back down to the tomb and start reading those books and scrolls… if you know ancient Achuvien?" Finn looked up at him a little hopelessly. "I wish there was a spell that just translated every language. There probably is, but I don't know it."

Rohan kissed Finn's temple. "We will find a way. I am certain we have scholars at the university who can assist us."

"Of course, you have a whole university full of learned professors and clever students! Christopher always wanted to go, but my stepfather wouldn't let him. It wouldn't add to Christopher's worth on the marriage market. In fact, being a *scholar* might detract from it," Finn responded bitterly.

"Christopher shall go to university after things settle down. And he has a position here as the King's Alchemist either way," Rohan said.

"Oh, you've no idea how much that means to him! He's dreamed all of his life to become an

alchemist and--thank you, Rohan! Thank you so much!" Finn threw his arms around Rohan's neck.

Rohan held Finn close to him, burying his face in Finn's neck. He breathed in the sweet scent of the man he loved. He wouldn't ever forget this scent. It was like life to him. They pulled back to look at one another.

"The bush… should we try to bring it back? Impress Christopher for once?" Finn asked.

"Why not? Together?" Rohan asked. "I've only ever used the power you give me for destruction though. Perhaps you should show me and I can follow along?"

"All right." Finn nodded.

The Fae prince turned towards the mostly dead rose bush. He slowly lowered himself to his knees. Rohan followed suit. Finn put his hands on the dirt around the rose's base.

"I find that I need to touch the ground to make it work. Or maybe that just directs where the magic goes. Again, so many questions," Finn laughed.

Finn then closed his eyes. Rohan kept his open and studied Finn carefully. Finn's breathing softened. His whole demeanor became very peaceful. A gold light appeared between Finn's outspread fingers. Rohan's eyes widened. The golden light began to spread. It pulsed out of Finn and towards the base of the rose bush. Golden light pooled around the trunk and started to sink into the earth as if the magic was watering the roots.

"It's not completely dead," Finn said quietly without opening his eyes. "There's life in her yet. We can bring her back."

"All right."

Rohan put his hands flat against the earth right by Finn's. Their pinkies touched and he let out a gasp as he felt the warm touch of Finn's magic leap towards him. But instead of drawing the magic into himself, he directed it outwards.

"Together!" Finn gasped. "We can do so much more than apart."

They linked their hands and pressed them against the earth. At first, the magic just spread out and started to stir the grass.

"Do you feel the rose bush? Everything has its own life force, Rohan. I see it as blue strands of light," Finn explained. "I don't know if it will look the same to you--"

"I see them!" Rohan gasped as the world as he knew it disappeared and was replaced by something *glorious*. "It's not just the plants, Finn. The castle, too! I can see how it was made. I could--could make *more*."

"That's fantastic, Rohan, but let's fix the bush first," Finn cautioned. "I remember the first time I quickened the land. I wanted to do too much."

"Right." Rohan pulled his focus back towards the garden. "First things first."

Rohan nodded, not that Finn could see him as his eyes were still shut. Rohan decided to do the same. There was so much to see--so much he wanted to *do*--but he needed to focus. When his eyelids shut, he still saw the threads of life. He narrowed his attention to the ones coming from the rose bush. There were just a few faint, blue strands that waved at him slowly.

"That's right, Rohan. You have them. Now we need to feed that life with our magic," Finn said.

"I thought you didn't know how to do any of this but you're teaching like a pro!" Rohan chuckled.

"This is all I know how to do," Finn laughed. "Now, let's *gently* feed these strands and--oh! Oh!"

The moment their joined magic touched the waving strands they went bright gold and began to multiply. Where there had been less than half a dozen, there were now *hundreds*. More and more and more until the light was almost blinding.

"Rohan! Rohan! I think that's enough or we're going to have a rose tree instead of a bush!" Finn

laughed, but delightedly. “Oh, Rohan… you have to see this.”

Even before Rohan opened his eyes, the scent of roses flowed over him. Before, it had been a faint, intermittent scent, but now… *now* it was as if he were surrounded by roses. And when he opened his eyes and looked around, he realized that he *was*.

“The rose garden… it’s never looked like this,” Rohan breathed.

He and Finn rose to their feet and slowly turned in a circle to see the whole of the rose garden. Where there had been a few pathetic blooms now the entire rose garden was blooming as if it were high summer during the most fertile year Rirea had ever had, which would have been far before Finn or his memories. Katie came out of the castle to gather more of the dishes when she gave out a startled gasp and stopped in mid-step as she saw the amount of blooms.

“Oh, my goodness! How?” Katie gasped. “Am I dreaming? The roses!”

Rohan felt the same. In this garden, Rirea bloomed even brighter than the Empire. The garden was beyond lush.

“Finn, this is…” Rohan just shook his head as the heavy blooms--all different colors--bobbed in the slight breeze.

“Rohan, we could do this for all of Rirea!” Finn cried with a determination that had Rohan dragging his eyes from the flowers to Finn’s face.

The Fae prince looked more beautiful than he normally did. His skin was radiant. His eyes glittered. He stood taller. In that moment, Rohan saw the king that Finn would be. Finn regarded this garden and saw a world beyond it.

“I will speak to Silver Soul. I know she will return. I will go back to the Empire to drain the excess life and I will bring it back here so that we can start restoring the land! Though our lovemaking is… powerful, I assume we’ll need more life to restore all of Rirea. At least, some of the farms,” Finn said, his jaw set. He turned his gaze upon Rohan. “I know we must learn much from the books below, but practical use of magic will help us learn, too. And it will also be a visual example for my father of what we can do together. And it will give the people hope, and maybe even a small harvest this year!”

Rohan found himself nodding as Finn spoke. “Yes, I agree. I knew it was possible, but seeing is believing! You’re more than right about that.”

He put his hands around Finn’s waist and turned the young man to him. Finn’s determined gaze became one of love. Finn slid his arms around Rohan’s back.

“We can do this, Rohan. We can *save* Rirea,” Finn told him.

“There is nothing we cannot do.”

And then they kissed. Rohan’s heart beat harder. This was bliss. Finn was everything. Even with his eyes closed, Rohan saw waving gold threads of life all around them. They really would be able to change everything. The garden was a promise of what was to come.

The rest of the day was a blur. Rohan contacted the university and they didn't just send one or two people over who could potentially read ancient Achuvien, but a whole department and over 50 graduate students, as well as the lead librarian, a whip-thin man named Crosley that constantly sniffed as he was allergic to book dust. But that wasn't going to stop him!

"No one moves *anything*!" Head Librarian Crosley had shrilly cried, lifting up a long, thin finger into the air. Everyone--all the students, even the other professors in their impressive robes--had frozen. Hugues, who had never left the tomb seemingly, stopped as well. "How the library is set up may tell us just as much as the books themselves! I want everything mapped. What book was where and next to what. Understood?"

The gaggle of graduate students nodded eagerly as they spread out with paper and quill to note every book's location. Rohan and Finn came up to Head Librarian Crosley.

"Head Librarian," Rohan said smoothly.

The man blinked at him for a moment as if he didn't recognize him. Finn felt a little better that he wasn't the *only* one who didn't know who Rohan was immediately. But the academic finally realized who was addressing him and made a sweeping yet somehow awkward bow.

"My king!" Crosley got out. "What an honor to meet you and to be brought into this extraordinary space. It is an historic archeological find, the last resting place of the Aeturnals. Their final words to us. And right beneath our feet all along!"

It wasn't just this room that was being examined by the students and professors. They had all spread out throughout the catacombs, taking notes and sketches of the mural outside the secret entrance and looking into the other darkened rooms and corridors that Rohan and Finn had not gone down yet.

Rohan inclined his head and urged the man back up. "Indeed, it is extraordinary, but it may be of *current* practical use."

Crosley stroked his very long salt and pepper beard that hung down to mid-chest. "*Current*, you say?"

"Yes, current." Rohan laced the fingers of his and Finn's hands together then he looked meaningfully up at the ceiling.

Crosley looked up and caught sight of their doppelgangers above him. He started. Looked down at them, back up at the ceiling, then back at them again. He then also gazed upon the sarcophagi for a moment. When he finally looked back at Finn and Rohan again his mouth was opening and shutting without words coming out for long moments.

"It's you! The two of you!" Crosley finally got out. "I didn't quite get your name, young man."

This last was said to Finn. Finn hesitated a moment. What would Crosley think when he realized he was speaking to a *Fae* prince? But, then again, he had been made aware that Rohan was descended from the Aeturnals so perhaps he wouldn't quite mind. Although, Finn was the son of Thalanil so...

Crosley began to blink rapidly and Finn realized he had been silent too long. Rohan squeezed their joined hands. Finn was sure he was going to save him from himself so he finally spoke. He needed to be a partner to Rohan, not a burden.

"I'm Prince Finrael Ravenspar," Finn answered.

"Ravenspar?" Crosley's voice was soft. "Of the ah--"

"King Thalanil Ravenspar's son," Finn quickly explained.

"Oh! Oh, yes, well, I can see the resemblance!" Crosley said, clearing his throat a few times for equal measure. He saw their linked hands. "A Ravenspar and an Aeturnal heir… well, well, well, what a story this would make."

"Yes, Head Librarian, but it's more than a story. You see… Well, we need to know what is in these books as quickly as possible. The key to saving Rirea may be inside of them," Rohan explained. "And we don't know if *they*," he indicated the Dreadbrood, "are real or an artist's overactive imagination. So everyone must work quickly."

"Oh, my! That is rather *current* and *disturbing*!" Crosley agreed. He blinked a few times more. "Professors Tilan and Riana are very fluent--well, as much as one can be--in ancient Achuvien. They have a veritable army of students to start going over and translating the manuscripts, but…"

"But?" Rohan lifted an eyebrow.

"We will work day and night since this is a *current* need, but even so…" Crosley licked his lips and began to sweat.

"It will take time?" Finn guessed. "Maybe more time than we're thinking?"

Crosley let out a relieved breath. "*Yes*, yes, something like that. If you gave me an idea of what we're looking for precisely--I mean I'm certain everything here may be important but--"

"Have them start *there*." Finn pointed to the shelf where he was certain Marikoth had stolen some volumes. "We believe that some books have been taken from there--"

"Taken?!" Crosley's hands flew up like startled birds at the thought of *any* books being gone.

"Yes, so I'm hoping if there is some order to the way this library was set up," Finn said, "that the books similar to those will be around where the missing ones were."

Still looking askance that anything had been removed, Crosley nodded and said, "Yes, yes, that would likely be true. We will start there and report to you on our progress!" With a final awkward bow he fast-walked away and cried, "Professors Tilan and Riana! On me!"

Two other robed people emerged from the scrum of students and joined him. Rohan and Finn watched everyone work efficiently and speak in a language that they didn't understand though it was Common. The terms were so different that Finn's head whirled.

"Should we let them do their work? I feel a bit like I'm in their way," Finn admitted as he sheltered in Rohan's arms.

"We're definitely not the center of attention," Rohan agreed. "We should probably leave and let them get to it."

"To think that answers could be here and we simply can't read them." Finn sighed. "Are you certain that we shouldn't ask Tearlach for help? Of everyone here, he's most likely the one to understand ancient Achuvien."

"True, though I'm hoping not all the books are written in that language, but… we cannot trust him,

Finn."

"I'm not fond of him either, but he seems to loathe Marikoth as much as we do," Finn pointed out.

"He also wants to go to war with your father," Rohan responded dryly.

"Yes, but only because he is mistaken as to who the enemy is. But I believe he can be reasoned with?" Finn made that sound like a question.

"Perhaps, but he is not…" Rohan grimaced. "I feel that we must keep any information about ourselves to our own people. For now. At least."

"You're probably right." Finn eyed the books. "I just want to know what our ancestors left for us."

"I do, too. And if we aren't making progress, we should enlist him. But not now," Rohan said, but then someone caught his eye at the bottom of the stairs. It was a rather prim-looking woman with her dark hair done up in a tight bun. She lifted what looked like a scroll towards Rohan. "Ah, just what I was waiting for. Stay here a moment, Finn."

Finn watched as Rohan hurried over to the woman. They spoke in too low tones for him to hear. She handed Rohan the scroll. He unrolled it and smiled. Finn wondered what this was. But it was definitely making Rohan happy. Rohan re-rolled the scroll. The woman bowed and hurried back up the way she'd come. While it was far brighter and friendlier now with all of these people in it, the tomb was still a *tomb* so Finn couldn't blame her haste to leave.

Rohan strode back over to Finn with the scroll. He was beaming, which made him even more handsome than he normally was. He stopped before Finn and rocked back and forth on his heels like an eager boy.

"Are you going to tell me what's making you so happy?" Finn asked and reached for the scroll.

But Rohan put it behind his back and out of Finn's reach. He was grinning rather impishly, which added to the little boy impression. "It's not quite finished yet. I don't have what I need here."

Finn put his hands on Rohan's chest, determined to ask him to make love before either of them did any other work. He was blushing, but he realized he shouldn't waste a moment when he was with Rohan. Even though he intended to be with him always, he should act as if it always was this second alone.

"I was hoping to take another bath if we're done being in the tomb today," Finn said softly, but then he put more force into his voice, "Perhaps we could do so together? And then a dinner by the fire? Just the two of us?"

Rohan slowly blinked before a more sensual smile crossed his lips. "Yes, I think that can be arranged. Yes, most definitely. Let's go do that now." He curled an arm around Finn's waist before calling out to Crosley, "Head Librarian! I would like reports every evening. Anything you discover, please alert me immediately."

"We will, King Rohan!" Crosley called.

"Most excellent."

Rohan led Finn out of the tomb. The sun was setting by the time they made it back up to Rohan's bedroom suite. Finn immediately went out onto the balcony. He rested his forearms on the stone railing and watched the dying of the light.

The Rirean king came up behind him with two glasses of rich, red wine, which were nothing like Marikoth had tried to serve him in the dream. Finn took a glass and sipped the wine, letting it linger on his tongue. Rohan rested a hand on his lower back as they both watched the sun set.

"The Wall." Finn gestured to the green Wall that was slowly turning black as the sun slipped behind the horizon. "For Silver Soul, it's not even there. I wonder what that means."

Rohan's hand caressed the back of Finn's neck. "She must be very powerful."

"I think so. She is old and wise. She lived when the Aeturnals were here. Even before that."

Finn sighed and leaned into Rohan just as the sun disappeared and twilight fell. He turned around so that he was facing the Rirean king. Rohan was looking down at his face. He cupped Finn's cheek.

"It's strange, but though I've been here for years and years before I met you, I cannot imagine this place without you in it, Finn."

Finn stroked Rohan's stubbled cheek. "Nothing could be more different from my old life at Tanglewood than being here with you, and yet, I feel like wherever I look I can picture us together here."

"I want that so much, Finn. For us to be together. *Always*," Rohan whispered.

Finn trembled. His love was returned. He knew that. Rohan had told him and shown him that was true in so many ways, but *still*, to hear it. Yet his father would not see it. Finn would make him see it. Did anyone else's opinions matter anyways?

"I feel the same. But--"

"I know. There is so much keeping us apart."

"There's only *one* person keeping us apart. My father."

Finn realized how foolish that sounded. His father wouldn't allow him to marry who he wanted? Why should Thalanil have a say in any of it? Were he and Rohan not fated? Was their relationship not sculpted into the very stone of this building? Could anyone truly stand between them? *No*. And he wouldn't let anyone do so.

"Even if we cannot convince him, I am staying with you. I cannot believe my father would go to war over me." Finn shook his head.

"Oh, Finn, wars have been fought for so much less, but few, for more. You are your father's greatest treasure. You are my heart. Regardless of what fate would have us be to one another, I would love you and pledge my life to you," Rohan swore.

Finn's throat grew tight. Happy tears formed in his eyes and he blinked rapidly to keep them from falling, but they fell regardless of his best intentions. Rohan kissed them away. He began to hum and swayed both their bodies to the low, lyrical sound. He spun Finn and brought him back into his arms. Finn laughed.

"Are we practicing for the ball?" Finn asked.

"We are indeed! We shall dance all night. When the midnight hour strikes, we shall head out under the stars and keep dancing!" Rohan chuckled as he dipped Finn.

"I don't have anything to wear," Finn teased. He did not care at all about clothes. But he wanted to look his best for Rohan. "Unless the things I came in are good enough."

"You would look glorious in rags! But you shall have a most gorgeous outfit. Did not Milius claim that he intended to make you clothes to rival that Fae tailor of yours? I will insist he honor that promise," Rohan said. "And I shall even deign to wear something kingly for once."

"You are kingly all the time, Rohan. You need nothing, but yourself to make you so," Finn complimented.

Rohan kissed him. Soft and sweet then deep and long. Finn wrapped his arms around Rohan's neck and his right leg curled around Rohan's powerful thighs. Rohan easily lifted Finn up and carried him into the castle. Finn kissed him again and again all over his face. Rohan's cheeks were already bristly compared to the morning while Finn's skin was still soft. He would never grow a beard. But he loved the difference.

"Ah, the staff worked quickly and filled the tub with hot water already! And are those rose petals from the garden?" Rohan asked as he carried Finn into the bathroom.

The sweet scent of roses reached Finn's nostrils. The bath water was steaming and red and white rose petals floated on top of it like beautiful boats on a calm sea.

"I think we gave Katie quite a fright when we brought the rose garden back," Finn said.

"Yes, but she must have gotten over it to do this. I already have a plan about where we can start restoring Rirea," Rohan said.

"I cannot wait to hear it."

"Later, I will talk your ear off with it. I want to kiss every inch of you now."

Rohan lightly put Finn down on the chair that Serxio usually sat in while he bathed. Finn was already toeing off his boots and watching Rohan with hungry, green eyes. Rohan stripped off his clothes with that graceful yet economical way he did everything. It was a warrior's way of moving. No unnecessary movements, but beautiful nonetheless. And then Rohan was naked.

Long, muscled body. A treasure trail of hair leading down to his thick cock that was already rising from its nest of curls. Finn swallowed the saliva that flooded his mouth. His hands twitched at the hem of his tunic, forgetting that he was supposed to strip too. Rohan strode over to him and sank down on his haunches. Finn swallowed again.

"Can I help you, Finrael?"

Finn nodded, unable to speak as desire held his throat in a vise.

"Arms up," Rohan instructed.

Finn did as he asked and his tunic was rushed off of his body and tossed somewhere. His nipples peaked. Rohan put his fingers underneath the waistband of his leggings. He slowly slipped them off of Finn's hips then thighs then calves. Finn wiggled his toes as the leggings came off and he was as naked as Rohan was.

"Hmmm, what a beautiful package I've unwrapped. All for me?" Rohan asked.

Finn kissed his lips and found his voice, "All for you."

Rohan lifted Finn into the tub as if he weighed nothing. Normally, Finn hated the fact that he was so slender and light, but not with Rohan. He felt safe with him. Cared for. Precious beyond measure.

The water was blessedly hot and the muscles in Finn's legs eased. There had been plenty of walking up and down the tomb's steps that day. He sighed delightedly. Rohan stepped in after him. The tub was huge. Far big enough for two.

"Who made this tub?" Finn laughed as he dunked his head under the water.

"My great-grandmother did. She supposedly loved being clean, but I, personally, think that she liked getting *dirty*," Rohan chuckled. "No one makes a tub this big for just *one*."

"I can appreciate that sentiment." Finn grinned at him.

Rohan leaned back in the tub, spreading his legs and urging Finn to lay in between them. Finn swam over, kissing Rohan eagerly, before he laid his back against Rohan's front. Rohan grasped a soft sea sponge and lathered it with spicy smelling soap. He then began to clean Finn's front. His soapy fingers glided over Finn's slick skin. Finn's cock hardened and he moaned. Rohan trapped his legs against the sides of the tub, keeping them open.

"Ah, now I have you, Finn, to do anything I want with you," Rohan teased.

"I'm all yours. Open to whatever you want," Finn said.

Rohan slicked both hands with soap and put the sponge to the side. He was running his bare hands over Finn's front. Finn arched into the touches. When he came down he felt the long, hard line of Rohan's cock rubbing along the cleft of his ass. He ground down on it, but then Rohan's soapy hands cupped his cock and ran up and down his length. Finn let out a mewl of pleasure and was arching up into those hands. Then he would plunge down onto that cock.

Rohan bit his shoulder and then kissed it. The pleasure-pain had Finn's head thrashing back and forth against Rohan's solid chest. Electric tingles ran from his cock to the top of his head to the tips of his toes. Heat built between his legs and filled his cock. Every stroke of Rohan's hands on him caused a hot *zing* to run through his entire body. There was that added eroticism of his legs being trapped against the tub's sides, he could not close them, he could not wiggle away. He was utterly exposed and open for Rohan's use.

His only "defense" was to make Rohan feel as good as he did. So he pushed back against Rohan's erection. He slid his body sinuously over Rohan's front. The Rirean king gasped and was thrusting up against Finn's ass. The tub water splashed over the sides of if they were in a gale at sea.

Finn turned his head so that he could kiss Rohan. Their mouths barely touched, but it did not matter. The rest of them did. Rohan sealed them together as his cock pulsed against Finn's ass. He rapidly stroked Finn's cock until the young man felt as if he was made of fire. He let out a cry that was mirrored by Rohan. A gasp. A release.

Finn's eyelids were only cracked open, but he thought he saw a golden light flow from their bodies and flood the entire room. Maybe it went beyond that. They both came as one. Their bodies jerking and shaking and, finally, falling back into the water. They lay exhausted in one another's arms even as Finn felt his magical reservoir was filled and Rohan's body glowed with runes. Sex magic had evidently worked again. Rohan let out a small laugh.

"What?" Finn asked sleepily.

Rohan pointed to what had been a rather insignificant houseplant in the corner of the room. It was in full bloom with trailers of branches stretching out for several feet. Finn grinned.

"Maybe we should make love in the middle of a field," Finn suggested.

Rohan stroked Finn's hair. "I was going to say that sounds very muddy. But we could be in a tent."

"We could be!" Finn brightened.

"Imagine us telling every farmer that we need to have sex in their fields to make their crops grow!"

"I don't know. I wouldn't mind making love to you anywhere. Besides, even if we got muddy, we'd just come back to this glorious tub to clean up," Finn reminded him.

"Best part."

Rohan kissed him tenderly.

* * *

THE STAFF HAD BROUGHT FRESH, hot water for them to sluice themselves off and truly be clean. They'd also brought a glorious supper of roast beef, creamy mashed potatoes with a wine sauce, and mushrooms in a thick, buttery sauce. It was set out on a small inside table by the fire. The chairs were loaded with furs and velvet cushions. Finn was about to curl down into one when he saw the scroll that Rohan had gotten from that woman earlier. It was on Rohan's desk and unrolled with the bottom weighted down with a piece of red wax holding it open.

"What is that, Rohan? You promised to tell me," Finn reminded him as he fished out a mushroom from the dish and eagerly ate it, licking his buttery fingers afterwards.

"Ah, that. That is for *you*. But let me put the finishing touch on it. Come here," Rohan requested as he sat down on the rather impressive chair behind it.

Finn had on one of Rohan's silk robes. It was so big on him that it came down to his ankles. He grabbed one of the furs off the chairs, wrapping it around his shoulders before sitting himself on Rohan's lap. Rohan kissed his cheek. Finn glanced down at the scroll then and gave a gasp.

"Rohan… this says… that I…"

"Yes, but let me finish it," Rohan said as he heated the red sealing wax, causing a small puddle to be formed on the bottom of the document. He then took his royal signet ring and pressed it into the hot wax. His final act was to sign it in his strong hand. "There. By order of the king, Prince Finrael Ashton Ravenspar is the one and only Lord of Tanglewood Manor once more."

Finn turned around and threw his arms around Rohan. "Thank you! Thank you! I--I don't know what to say! Rohan…"

"You need say nothing. This is but a wrong being righted. I am not giving you anything. I am restoring what is already yours" Rohan's expression grew slightly hard. "And I look forward to seeing you reclaim your home from the people who treated you so cruelly."

Finn couldn't speak. His feelings were too great. He simply kissed Rohan with all he had.

SHADOWS

Ryleth walked and read. The book was bound in leather with iron straps. It smelled of great age, but the pages made of animal skin were as sturdy as ever. She should have been reading this at a desk with gloves barely breathing upon it. But she wanted to get information to Rohan and Finn, but also she had to check on her people. So the walking and reading and using her magic to ensure she didn't run into a wall or anyone else, was necessary.

"Good, wolfie! Nice, wolfie!" Jani's sweet, young voice lifted up ahead of her.

Ryleth's head snapped up. Was Jani speaking to a *wolf*? She closed the book and sped forward. Due to Finn and Thalanil's great kindness, the people from her village were being housed in the lower levels of the palace. The halls were wide and the rooms were small, but clean and airy. They would have been far better compared to the tents by the lake even if they had been dingy, dim-lit hovels. And there was plenty of food and warm clothes provided. But, clearly, the wildlife that Ryleth had hoped to escape by coming indoors had followed if Jani was really talking to a wolf!

She rushed into the little girl's bedroom, one hand limned with fire while the other carried the precious book. But she immediately lowered that hand and blinked as she saw Jani was seated on the ground with a wolf. A massive white wolf with red eyes whose tail swept the floor clean with its enthusiasm. Jani was scratching the wolf between the ears.

"Tyreon," Ryleth breathed, recognizing the King of the Wolves not only from Finn and Rohan's descriptions of him, but tales she had heard as well.

The white wolf turned his fluffy head to look at her with tongue lolling out and an almost good natured smile on his handsome face. Tyreon could have killed Jani in a second but he would not. Tyreon was not like a wild wolf though he roamed the forests of the Empire with ease. No, he was Thalanil's boon companion and magical. He wouldn't hurt a little girl, but Ryleth had no idea what he was doing down here.

"The wolfie came down looking for someone, I think," Jani said, all smiles and bright eyes.

Ryleth sank down onto her haunches and offered her free hand to Tyreon to sniff. He did so almost delicately and then nuzzled her palm. She petted his soft fur and found herself cooing at him rather ridiculously.

"Are you looking for King Thalanil?" Ryleth asked.

The wolf shook his huge head. Ryleth blinked. Had that been a shake?

"Are you looking for Prince Finrael?" Ryleth asked.

Before she'd half-way gotten the sentence out, Tyreon was sitting up taller and gazing at her with desire. He whined.

"It is Finn," she said.

"Is Finn here? And Rohan?" Jani asked.

"I'm afraid not as to both of them," Ryleth explained to Jani and Tyreon. Both looked alarmed so Ryleth held up a hand as if she could physically stop the emotion. "But they are together!"

"Where?" Jani asked, and she had a feeling Tyreon was asking the same thing though his ears only flickered.

"They're safe and they're together. Jani, I need you to leave me and Tyreon for a moment," she said.

Jani frowned. "But this is *my* room."

"Yes, but--"

Tyreon got up and went to the door then looked back meaningfully at Ryleth.

All right then, we'll walk and talk.

Ryleth squeezed Jani's shoulder. "Everything okay here? Everyone have enough food, clothes, blankets?"

Jani nodded vigorously. "The food is ever so delicious! Warm and tasty. Look at my new skirt!" She jumped up and spun to show off the patterned gray and gold skirt.

"Very nice. And the horses? Tempest and Sweetfire?" Ryleth asked. She could not forget about them. Rohan and Finn would be so upset if the horses were harmed.

"In the stables! I saw them there myself! The stablehands were so excited to take care of them, already feeding them too much sugar," Jani said with a shake of her head. "I will show them the right way to brush them tomorrow."

"I'm sure you will." Ryleth stood up. "You know where my rooms are, do you not?"

"Near the royal chambers!" Jani's eyes went huge when she said that.

"Yes, near Prince Finrael's room," she nodded. "If I'm needed, send a servant to get me. You can't go up there yourselves. Do you understand? Will you remind the others?"

Jani nodded. "We know!"

Ryleth then went to join Tyreon out in the hallway. Just as she was stepping across the threshold, Jani called out to her.

"What is it, dearest?" Ryleth asked.

The little girl rocked back and forth. "Maeli says you won't be our priestess any longer. That you're important and we shouldn't bother you anymore."

Ryleth went over and hugged Jani. "I will always be your priestess. And I will never be too important to help you."

Jani hugged her back. She released the girl and with a wave went into the hallway once more where Tyreon waited. They began to walk towards the main stairs that would lead up into the official, partially public areas of the palace where the Council met and courtiers waited to speak to the king or each other. She needed to go there so that she could get back to her rooms and continue reading. But, for now, she glanced down at her furry companion who looked up at her with intelligent red eyes and a tail that waved like a banner.

"I'm going to assume you can understand me," she said. "Because you're giving a very good impression of it."

The wolf definitely nodded. Ryleth let out a delighted laugh.

"Finn is in Rirea at Reave Castle with Rohan," she said.

The damned wolf's eyebrows rose. She would have sworn it. She laughed again.

"Now let me tell you why."

She then explained to Tyreon all about Marikoth and the undead and even what she knew about

Death Mages, the Heir and her research. She also told him her feelings about the Council and Lyari. She had no idea if the wolf knew who these people were, let alone all the complicated thoughts she had on them, but Tyreon certainly behaved like he was taking it all in. He even growled when she mentioned Lord Paquen!

"Needless to say, I made Finn promise to return to the Empire before his father gets back to explain everything. Hopefully, we'll have a lot more information to share with him." She patted the book that she cradled in her arms. "So next steps are for me to read this and the other volumes and check in on Finn every one of our days through the Luminus. Now you know everything."

A soft bark came from Tyreon and his tail flew that flag.

"Any ideas you'd care to share? Because I think we could use those."

She leaned over to pet him. Tyreon's eyes half shut in anticipation of her touch, but at the last moment, his head shot to the left. They had gotten to the second floor and were about to go right to her chambers.

"What's wrong? What are you--oh," she stopped.

Tyreon raced over towards a large cabinet that sat against the wall. She squeezed herself alongside it and the wolf so they were hidden at least partially from the people that Tyreon had heard coming far before her. Their voices were low, but she could hear anger and fear in both of them. They were speaking in a room on the other side of the cabinet, but as their voices rose she was able to catch some of what was said.

"--must get there before him," a female voice hissed. "Even one on their own will be a battle but the two of them together may end this before it begins."

Who are they talking about? Thalanil and Finn? Could be, but they are speaking of getting somewhere first and, allegedly, Finn is here.

"--certain it exists? Does it work?" a male voice pressed.

"He sent word he was coming," the female answered. "So it must."

"--position has been--Death Mages cannot live--" the male's voice was too low to hear anything but those words.

Ryleth stiffened though as they were enough. Finn could not live? Was this a plot to kill Finn?

"That's still our position. Once--gone then--too long under one family's rule," the woman finished.

Their voices stopped, but footsteps were approaching. Ryleth pressed herself as tightly as she could against the wall and the cabinet. Tyreon was doing his best to look like a wolf statue. Still, if they turned down this way towards where her and Tyreon's hiding place was they would be discovered. But, thankfully, both went left.

Ryleth stuck her head out from behind the cabinet and saw two cloaked figures walking into the distance. One of them broke off to go into another room while the other continued down the hallway. Ryleth let out a breath. She glanced down at Tyreon.

"We need to tell Finn about this. There's no way to reach his father, but Finn must know," she said.

Tyreon let out a low *woof* of agreement.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm *glad* Finn's not in the palace right now. I think he's safer in Rirea," she said.

Another *woof*.

"The Luminus is this way."

She led Tyreon down the same hallway in the same direction as the hooded figures she had seen.

She kept her magical senses out all around her so she would know if anyone was coming towards them. Tyreon padded silently beside her, ears pricked. But they met no one on their way to the Wyvern Tower where the Luminus was kept.

Relief and the wrong belief that no one would come to the tower had Ryleth letting down her guard. It was Tyreon's low growl that alerted her to the person already in the Luminus' room. The glow from the crystal ball cast an eerie green radiance over the stones and through the half-open door.

Ryleth looked in just an instant to see that a hooded and cloaked figure was standing with their back to her and was using the Luminus. She thought she saw a view of Rohan's bedroom in the ball just before she ducked out of the doorway. She heard a scuffing step inside. They had heard her and Tyreon! Maybe seen them!

She raced, light as a leaf, up the stairs to the top of the tower. The night sky exploded above her. The sound of snuffling wyverns filled her ears. Their ophidian scent filled her nostrils. There was no light up here but moonlight. And there was no one up here but her.

She had expected Tyreon to be behind her, but once she got to the top, she realized she was alone. The wolf must have gone *down* the steps. And maybe that had been a better idea. Because now she had nowhere to go and she though heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

Cursing herself internally, Ryleth did the only thing she could do. She hustled into one of the wyvern's lairs, and not an empty one, an *occupied* one. Because the wyvern was going to be the only thing that would keep her hooded pursuer from finding her.

As she ducked inside the nearest lair, she saw a flash of red eyes. The wyvern was curled on the ground, tail covering snout. She put a finger to her lips to indicate silence as if this wyvern would know that movement or care to comply even if it did.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I have to come in here. I'll be gone as quickly as I can."

The wyvern's head lifted. She caught a flash of white teeth, but that didn't stop her. It tracked her movements as she lightly leaped over the coiled, draconid body so that she was at the very back of the lair and hunkered down behind the wyvern.

She hoped she would be all right. After all, these were not wild wyverns. They were meant to be ridden like Jacona and Sweetfire. They were domesticated. Sort of. But surely they weren't eating Fae right or left or she would have heard about it.

Yet the wyvern did not appear to know it was domesticated as it swung its massive head towards her, lips peeled back from its razor sharp teeth that looked to glow in the dark, and red, sulfurous eyes narrowing as it regarded her.

Even domesticated animals can kill if we do stupid things with them like crawl into their lairs at night.

But if she had any plan to leave the lair that was lost when she saw the hooded figure with a glowing stone held up emerge from the stairwell. Ryleth threw herself flat on the ground so that the wyvern's bulk would hide her even if that lightstone was thrust into the lair. If she'd had any thought she could cast an invisibility spell--difficult and too time consuming to cast in any case--that lightstone would have stripped away any protection that the invisibility gave. It pulsed with magic-robbing power. An Aeturnal Breaker stone, one that could break down any spell in its vicinity given time.

The wyvern's head shot towards the figure with the Breaker stone and its eyes remained narrowed. But it seemed to Ryleth that it stretched out its body to give her more protection from the light. Regardless if that was true, she owed this wyvern some treats! Though "treats" for a wyvern

likely were things like cows and not sugar lumps.

The harsh green light of the Breaker stone swept above her. She pressed herself closer to the ground, praying not to be seen. The wyvern hissed at the figure when it drew too near with the Breaker stone. Ryleth counted to ten in her head, before she got to five the light had moved on.

She risked lifting her head to see over the wyvern's back. She saw that the figure was checking out all the lairs--though cautiously--as angry wyvern-hisses kept them from coming too close. The figure spent more time in the empty lairs, going inside them to thoroughly check them out, including one that had heavy broken chains in front of it.

Ryleth ducked her head back down as the hooded figure left that final lair and stalked back towards the stairs. The Breaker stone's green light was cut off as the figure tucked it back into their cloak. Ryleth didn't breathe until they completely disappeared into the stairwell. Then she collapsed and laid on the floor of the lair for long moments. The wyvern looked from the stairs to her and made a soft ticking noise.

"Thank you. I couldn't have done it without you."

The wyvern ticked some more.

Ryleth got to her feet and dusted herself off then she jumped over the wyvern who appeared very amused by her antics now. She waved at the great beast who slowly lowered its head down to go back to bed. She still needed to use the Luminus and warn Finn about what she'd heard.

It's more than that, Ryleth realized *The Luminus is paired to the one in Rirea. I know they can be linked to others, but that looked like Reave Castle they were contacting. I highly doubt though that it was either Finn or Rohan they were speaking to. They have a traitor there, too, I think.*

There was danger all around the Fae prince and Rirean king. She was not going to let them be blindsided if she could help it. She crept down the stairs. This time her senses were stretched out as far as they could go. She sensed no one, not even Tyreon who she had hoped to find. Hopefully, the fluffy bastard had gotten clean away and would meet up with her later to compare notes. He had gotten a sniff of the traitors at least!

Which is more than I did! Other than knowing one is a woman and one is a man I didn't get a glimpse of their faces.

The voices might have sounded familiar, but she really couldn't say. They were artificially cast low and not in a normal speaking tone of voice as they would have been if they were speaking to her. So Tyreon's nose might be the only way to discover who they were.

She'd reached the Luminus' room. She laid her back against the stone wall and quickly darted a look into the darkened room. Other than the softly glowing Luminus, there appeared to be no one else there. With a relieved sigh, Ryleth stepped into the room.

She only felt the spell a second before it went off. It exploded all around her, blinding her for a moment as it lit up the room, before it sent her into unconsciousness.

OLD FRIENDS

"Good morning!" Serxio sailed into Rohan's bedroom, beaming and perky.

"We're out on the balcony!" Finn called to him and sipped his creamy hot chocolate. His eyelids fluttered shut at the exotic, indulgent drink. He'd never had anything like it and he wanted to drink it forever.

"Should I be jealous?" Rohan asked from his spot across from Finn at the table. Finn cocked his head to the side in confusion. "You look like you're in love with that hot chocolate."

"Oh, I am!" Finn grinned. "You are most definitely second place in my heart in comparison to this rich, creamy deliciousness."

Rohan laughed and shook his head. "Well, I suppose it could be worse."

"What could be worse?" Serxio asked as he popped out onto the balcony. "Oooh, hot chocolate!"

"Let me pour you a cup!" Finn offered as he lifted the heavy, warm pot.

"Yes, please, though we might want to take those to-go!" Serxio said as he assiduously watched Finn fill up a delicate cup with the chocolate.

"Why would we want them to-go?" Rohan stretched his arms wide, gesturing to the remarkably beautiful day.

The castle looked washed clean somehow. Flowers were blooming everywhere and not just in the gardens either. Vines, which had died away, were now crawling up the white, stone walls with vigor, house plants bloomed and bloomed and bloomed, and the old grapevines that had died last summer were back on the castle's west side. The plants were not the only things thriving. There was a general feeling of joy in the air. Finn believed it was their lovemaking and being together that had more than restored the simple potted plant. He was beginning to think that if they just continued to remain together that the land might heal.

"Finn's friends! Magna, Emmott and Jacob!" Serxio grinned and then drank more hot chocolate.

Finn leaned forward in his seat, his heart in his throat. "You found them?!"

"I did better than that! They're downstairs!" Serxio's eyes twinkled.

Finn leaped up, nearly toppling the table. His precious cup of hot chocolate sloshed into the saucer. "Oh, I have to see them! Rohan, they have to meet you! And they must try this hot chocolate!"

"Serxio, we need to dress. But, in the meantime, send our guests to the rose garden and get them some hot chocolate while they wait."

"Will do!" Serxio bowed.

Finn downed the rest of the milky, creamy drink before he bolted into the bedroom. He was already pulling on some dark brown leggings that went with his deep green tunic--Rohan said it matched his eyes--that Milius had made for him when Serxio swept past. Rohan soon joined him. Finn

couldn't help pausing in his dressing to watch Rohan let the silk robe slide off his naked body. His broad, v-shaped back, narrow waist, and long legs… He swallowed. How many times had they made love last night? Not to mention when they woke up that morning?

"Finn, if you keep looking at me like that we won't be greeting your friends anytime soon," Rohan tossed over his shoulder as he went into his closet.

Finn blinked, sighed and started pulling on his boots. Luckily, Rohan was even quicker than he was at dressing. It appeared that Rohan's clothes all went with one another so he could simply reach in and grab something. In this case, it was a dark pair of pants tucked into knee-high boots, a white cotton flowing shirt, and a long coat that came to his knees in black velvet.

"You looked beautiful," Finn murmured as he dove in for a kiss.

"Nothing compared to you."

They kissed long and deep. When they broke apart, they were both breathing heavily.

"We *have* to go," Finn said, though he wasn't sure if he was talking to Rohan or himself.

"We do." Rohan nodded. He then went over to the desk and took up the scroll that named Finn Lord of Tanglewood. When Finn gave him a questioning look, he explained, "While your friends are welcome to stay with us at the castle, I thought you might want to get their old home back for them."

"Yes, yes, I do," Finn answered.

Rohan tucked the scroll into an interior pocket of his long coat. The Rirean king then slipped an arm around Finn's waist as he was escorting Finn out of the bedroom. Finn paused by the Luminus. He frowned. He did not see Ryleth in the glass ball and he really shouldn't expect her.

"Based upon how much time has passed in the Empire, we shouldn't expect to hear from her until tomorrow earliest, Finn," Rohan pointed out.

Finn nodded. "Yes, you're right. I suppose I'm just curious--and a little *worried*--about how things are going in the Empire."

"You're concerned how people are reacting to you being a Death Mage?" Rohan guessed.

Finn nodded again. "I'm so glad to be here. I'm needed the most here. But I think the people there need explanations and comfort. But neither my father nor I are there to give those things."

"I know. But I believe that any explanation should be done with your father by your side."

Finn looked up into Rohan's face. "What you're not saying is that any explanation I give--as a Death Mage and someone who looks human--won't be listened to."

"Some will listen. But they enslave humans there, Finn."

Finn recalled the way both the merchant that had wanted to beat Jani and Lord Paquen had behaved towards him when they'd seen his round ears and green eyes.

"You're right. More than right."

But it made Finn wonder *how* even if they could convince Thalanil that they needed to rule a recombined Empire and kingdom how the Fae would react. Or, more importantly, how they would treat their fellow human citizens.

So much will have to change if we are to go forward.

"It will be all right." Rohan held him more tightly. "I don't know how. But it will be."

Finn smiled broadly at him. "I believe you. And thank you. That helped to hear."

"I find that it helps to *say* then I start believing it."

With one final glance at the Luminus, Finn and Rohan went into the hallway. They had noticed the vines and healthier gardens from the balcony, but it was the people inside that were a revelation. Their cheeks were rosy. Their eyes were bright. They walked with a spring in their step. Everyone was smiling as if they'd spent the night with the love of their life too.

Rohan frowned. “Are you noticing this?”

“Yes.” Finn chuckled. “It’s like when I made Tanglewood bloom. Magna said she felt years younger and… there were always some babies made.”

Rohan’s eyebrows lifted. “Oh, ooooohhhh.”

“Yes, I know.” Finn’s cheeks pinked. “Who knows what us being together will bring in addition to that.”

They had made it to the doors that lead out into the rose garden. While yesterday, there had been just the faintest scent of flowers, now the sweet smell reached them in a tidal wave of perfume. The grass was thick, lush and dark green. The rose bushes were taller and studded with blooms, more looked ready to burst open at any moment.

“By the gods, maybe we *should* make love in the fields,” Rohan whispered.

“Maybe,” Finn let out a soft laugh, amazed at the bountiful life before them.

They stepped out into the garden. It took a moment for Magna, Emmott or Jacob to notice them. A large pot of hot chocolate had been set out. Magna was pouring out while Katie arranged a plate of sandwiches for them. Emmott opened his mostly toothless mouth in joy at the chicken salad sandwich Katie put in front of him. Jacob was joking with Katie and she was blushing. Jacob had always been a favorite of everyone he met. It was also Jacob that saw Finn first.

Jacob jumped from his seat. “Finn! By the gods, Finn!”

Finn rushed over to the stablemaster and they embraced. He smelled of clean hay and horses. The scent of home. Finn was surprised at the tears that came to his own eyes as the joy of seeing Jacob was sharp and poignant. And he also knew that this time, he could truly be the man that Jacob had always wished for him to be.

“Finn! Your hair! Oh, I like it! Very fashionable!” Magna enthused as she touched his white hair with a slightly trembling hand.

Finn didn’t explain to her it was from his magic. Not right then at least. Emmott already had a mouthful of chicken salad. He was always greedy with his food.

Because he never knew if he’d get any more. Well, that time is over. I will make certain of that.

Emmott talked around the food to say, “So good to see you, Finn! We thought you were dead!”

“Emmott!” Magna slapped the man’s shoulder. “You can’t say that!”

“Why not? It’s the only reason we left Tanglewood,” Emmott explained after swallowing. “I don’t want him to think we abandoned him. We only left because we thought he had left this life!”

Jacob gave him a tight smile. “I hate to say it, but Emmott’s right. We only left Tanglewood in that bastard’s hands because we thought we’d lost you.”

“I’m so sorry you went through all of that,” Finn told them. “I wasn’t able to return to Rirea until now. But I’m back and things are going to change.”

“They must be changing if we’re having tea in the king’s rose garden!” Magna said *sotto voce*.

Clearly, none of them realized who Rohan was. Finn turned his head to look back at the Rirean king. Rohan was leaning against the wall, arms loosely crossed, smiling broadly at everyone.

“Well, speaking of the *king*, let me introduce you to King Rohan De Clare.” Finn stepped back and extended an arm towards Rohan.

Magna made a soft sound as she stared open-mouthed at the Rirean king. Emmott stuffed the rest of the chicken salad sandwich in his mouth as he was clearly certain they were getting kicked out and this might be his last meal. Jacob tugged at the top of his tunic and swallowed. Katie was looking down at the table and smiling.

“Guys, guys, it’s okay! Rohan is my… my…” Finn didn’t know what to call Rohan. His

beloved? His fated one? His chosen?

"Your majesty! Forgive us!" Magna cried and started to lower herself to the ground to kneel.

Emmott grabbed another sandwich, but went down on his old knees too. Jacob sank down easily and bowed his head.

"There's no need for bowing!" Rohan gestured for them to stand. He actually helped Magna to her feet. "Please sit and enjoy some food, madam."

"Magna. My name's just Magna. No madam here," she blushed and kept bowing her head as he helped her into a chair.

Finn practically lifted poor Emmott into his chair. The old man had lived a life filled with backbreaking labor and his knees simply didn't work that well anymore. He would be retired once Finn got Tanglewood back. His life would be one of ease and comfort from now on. All of theirs would be.

Jacob got up and was pulling out one of the chairs for Rohan and then for Finn.

"Thank you, Jacob. I have heard you are a world class stablemaster," Rohan said as he took a seat after Finn had.

"I just like the animals, your majesty," Jacob answered modestly.

"I've seen Sweetfire. You took excellent care of her," Rohan said.

"Is she here? She disappeared with you, Finn," Jacob said and actually looked around for the horse as if she was hiding behind a rose bush.

"No, she's not," Finn said. The moment he saw Rohan's pained expression he added, "But she will be. Ryleth has her and Tempest. I'm sure that Tyreon can be convinced to let the horses through."

Rohan immediately brightened. "Tempest! I thought I'd lost him. Don't get me wrong. Thunder is a wonderful horse, but--"

"Tempest is Tempest." Finn nodded knowingly. "They were both looking fat and happy in the Empire when I left them."

"The *Empire*?" Magna's eyes got even larger than they already were.

"Ah, well, that's… that's a long story," Finn said, suddenly tongue tied about everything.

Rohan saved him by bringing out the scroll. "I am not the only royalty at this table. Can any of you read?"

"I can." Jacob lifted a hand.

Rohan handed him the scroll. Jacob carefully unrolled it. His eyes swept over the beautifully written document. He was smiling and clicking his tongue by the end of it. He lifted shining eyes to Finn.

"*Prince*? You're a Fae prince?" Jacob asked.

Finn nodded, his throat too tight to speak.

"Jacob, what does it say? Oh, you must read it to us!" Magna requested eagerly.

"By order of the king, Prince Finrael Ashton Ravenspar is the one and only Lord of Tanglewood," Jacob read.

"Lord of Tanglewood? A prince? And Lord of Tanglewood?" Magna stared ahead as if in a daze.

"And Tanglewood is the *least* of what Finn deserves or that I would give him." Rohan cupped Finn's cheek, running a thumb over his jaw, a move that *didn't* go unnoticed by anyone at the table. Finn pinked but beamed at him.

Finn cleared his throat, suddenly feeling filled with strength at Rohan's touch, and turned to face the other three. "Today, after we eat and catch up, I am going to reclaim Tanglewood from Gerard."

Emmott's eyebrows rose even as he chewed another sandwich. He clearly had never heard this

tone from Finn before. Jacob nodded approvingly. Magna shook her head in sheer disbelief.

"This is exactly how your mother would want things, gods bless her soul," Magna sniffed.

"And I hope that the three of you will agree to live at Tanglewood again for it is *your* home as much as mine, maybe more so," Finn said.

"Perhaps you might not be spending so much time there if there's another, ah, place you need to be?" Magna tipped her head to Rohan who had kept a possessive, loving hand on the back of Finn's neck.

"Yes, that is very true." Finn smiled at Rohan. "I also have places in the Empire that I own. Other estates, which you are also welcome to live on if you wish. But I thought that Tanglewood would be your first choice because you know it."

"Are you--you *rich*, Finn, as well as noble?" Emmott asked around the bread and cheese in his mouth.

"Emmott!" Magna rolled her eyes. "He's a prince of the Fae Empire! What do you think?"

"Oh, well, I wasn't sure and--"

"Just to make it clear," Finn gently interrupted their argument, "yes, I have money. More than enough so that none of you have to work another day in your lives. You can finally *retire* Emmott in a little cottage on the estate, which I will have remodeled."

Emmott's mouth fell open to show them his half-chewed bite. Magna tipped it closed.

Finn continued, "Jacob, while I would love for you to take care of any horses at Tanglewood, I know you've always wanted a stable of your own. So while Tanglewood is your home always, I wish to fund whatever business you want."

"Finn… I don't know what to say!" Jacob shook his head. "Tanglewood is really where I wish to be so long as I can help you and not any others."

"Of course, Jacob. I'm honored beyond words. Now, Magna," Finn began.

"No, no, no, the kitchen and run of the manor is *mine*, Finn." Magna shook her head firmly. "I've been dreaming of having it back again and serving you so that's my dream."

"Okay, Magna, whatever you want shall be yours," Finn assured her, laughing.

"Exactly! You know how to keep a person happy, Finn!" She finally started to eat.

"Try the hot chocolate. It's to die for," Finn sighed, making sure that everyone else had a cup before he did. He'd drink his weight in hot chocolate if he could.

"So you have some tales to tell us, Prince Finrael," Jacob said with a grin.

Finn laughed. He reached over to Rohan and they linked their fingers together. "We do. Now where to begin…"

GHOSTS

"There you are!" Serxio's voice rang out behind Christopher.

"Yes, here I am, in my laboratory, how… *unsurprising*," Christopher answered, not looking up from the microscope where he was comparing the dead flesh of the rat with the dead flesh of the undead.

"Indeed! This was the first place I looked, of course," Serxio answered, undeterred by his dry tone and lack of enthusiastic response. But Serxio was always that way as if he couldn't be offended by Christopher's obvious desire to push everyone away. "I don't believe you even set foot in your bedroom suite since yesterday."

"You feel safe enough to sleep when the undead can simply walk in? Or we could be made into them?" Christopher did glance up then from his work to look at Serxio with a jaundiced eye.

Serxio's expression became anxious and Christopher almost wished he hadn't said anything. Because, unlike himself, the foppish lord couldn't assist in unraveling the undead's secrets.

"Fair point. But a good glass of wine--or *ten*--does dim the constant alarm I feel," Serxio swallowed and started to look around his laboratory.

Serxio was dressed in brilliant orange slashed with yellow and red today, like a sunset. He glowed yet somehow he pulled it off. And as silly as he sometimes pretended to be, he wasn't foolish at all. Yet he did stand out among the pipettes, burners and the two rotting undead in the corner.

"What brings you down here? To find out the results of my tests?" Christopher brightened a little at the thought that Serxio was interested in his work.

He wanted to be useful. He would be useful. In fact, he already had some findings to share.

"Do you have results already?" Serxio asked, coming over to look at what he was doing.

"I have one answer," Christopher answered, feeling a trickle of excitement flowing through him.

"What?" Serxio's eyes widened.

"The undead are *not* created by draining their life force before turning them," Christopher said.

Serxio blinked. "You can tell this? For certain."

"Yes, this final test confirmed it. However the undead are made, they are not created with draining Death Magic," Christopher said. "Their tissue is completely different. I don't believe you could turn one into the other. The undead tissue is far more like the normal dead rat's."

Serxio's eyes went to the second dead rat that he had killed yesterday in a non-magical way. The foppish young lord tugged at his collar as he took in the pinned and dissected animal.

"I made her death quite quick," Christopher assured him.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure." But Serxio was still plucking at his collar. "It's just the *pins* and the blood

and the organs and--"

Christopher covered the dead rat with a handkerchief. Serxio let out an audible sigh of relief and slumped forward.

"Thank you," Serxio said.

"Most people become queasy at the sight of a dissection," Christopher said generously.

"Well, what you're able to figure out from it is really quite extraordinary, Christopher. King Rohan will be most impressed and pleased," Serxio told him.

Christopher was quite proud of this conclusion. He actually believed he had learned *more* than just that. He was almost certain that the magic that had created the undead was an anathema to Death Magic, which was rather fascinating. Maybe Death Magic was badly named, a misnomer. He wasn't sure so that's why he would not say yet.

Serxio's brow furrowed. "It's so strange, isn't it? I mean… well, I don't know much about magic, but what little I know about Marikoth makes me think he couldn't help but take a sip or two of their lives."

"I would rather agree with you. I have also isolated some of the substances I believe were used in creating the undead. Before we… lost Finn, I had him gathering samples of the diseased vegetation in the Lupine Woods. There are several toadstools used to turn them."

"Well, I am certainly not surprised that there are things from the Lupine Woods involved." Serxio shivered. "That whole place is full of poison."

"Indeed." Christopher's eyes narrowed slightly. "While I am gratified that you are interested in my work, I do not think you are here for that."

Serxio drew a finger along the slate counter where his experiments rested. He looked at his finger--which was blackened and frowned as he cleaned it off. "No, I came here to bring you upstairs."

"Why? Does the king or Finn need something?" Christopher asked.

"Sort of. Well, your friends are here." Serxio smiled at him.

"I don't have any friends," Christopher answered flatly.

"Oh, but you do! I mean Leonid and I--"

"Except for you two," Christopher said softly. "Yes, but you are not speaking of yourself and Leonid."

"No, I mean Magna, Emmott and Jacob," Serxio answered. He tried to appear chipper as if Christopher were going to agree the former Tanglewood servants were friends of his. "They're here! Upstairs! Having hot chocolate and sandwiches!"

Christopher stared at him silently for two ticks then turned back to his experiments. "As I said, outside of you and Leonid, I have no friends."

"I am certain that they would want to see you!"

"I am certain that they would not." Christopher's tone was very flat, very dry.

"Well, I'm certain that they would be happy to know that you're *well* and situated," Serxio protested.

Christopher's right hand tightened around the edge of the counter. "You did not know me before, Serxio, so I can understand why you might *mistake* people having warm feelings for me."

"Mistake? I--"

"I treated all three of them terribly. Just like I treated Finn. While my stepbrother has a heart of gold, most people--most right-minded people--would never forgive me," Christopher responded. "Magna, Emmott and Jacob probably would be shocked and sorry that I was here. They, undoubtedly,

believe I deserve to be slaving away for my father."

"I don't believe that's true. I don't think anyone could want that for you." Serxio gently touched his left forearm.

"While I do not mean to insult you, Serxio, those statements show either a complete lack of imagination or a very naive view of the world. I don't believe either of those things about you, so you are merely lying to both of us," Christopher said with a sigh. "You want good things for me for some reason."

"Because I'm your friend! And I see the worth in you," Serxio insisted. "Now, look, I will take you at your word that Magna, Jacob and Emmott despise you, all right?"

"That would be wise. Yet I hear a *but*."

"*But!* Rohan gave Finn--or I should say, rather, that he *restored* to Finn--the lordship of Tanglewood last night," Serxio said.

Christopher froze, but then he nodded. "As it should be."

"Yes, most definitely, even though Finn has likely more manors, estates and castles than he can shake a stick at! Still, Tanglewood should be his, and now it is his," Serxio explained.

"I do not understand how this relates to me." Christopher frowned.

"Because he is also going to take back Tanglewood today from your father and brother. Rohan, Leonid and myself--along with Magna, Emmott and Jacob--will be going with him," Serxio continued. "And you did promise to be there."

Christopher closed his eyes. He had promised, because he knew that Finn would never give up trying to "save" Miles from Gerard. But Finn didn't understand that Miles was already lost. Yet he had promised…

"I did, but I did not promise to have hot chocolate and sandwiches with Magna, Emmott and Jacob," Christopher pointed out. It was a fine point, but it was a point to be sure.

"But seeing them here will dispel some of the tension that would occur if you first saw them on the road to Tanglewood," Serxio insisted. "And there will be enough tension during that journey as there is."

"They believe I killed their fellow servant," Christopher blurted out.

Maybe if Serxio understood exactly why they disliked him he would understand how tension-lowering could never happen anywhere.

"W-what? Why would they believe such a thing?" The foppish lord goggled at him.

Christopher shifted on his stool and said, "Because I led them to believe I did."

He hated talking about his past, because any part of it would cause decent people to back away from him. He fully expected Serxio to do so. It surprised him how much it mattered that Serxio think well of him. Serxio was not at all the type of person he had ever cared about, let alone thought would befriend him. But, then again, Serxio wasn't exactly what Christopher had assumed someone like Serxio would be like. And Serxio, once more, completely surprised him.

"Well, why would you want them to think that?" Serxio looked perplexed, not horrified.

"Because it would make them stay clear of me," Christopher admitted and he swallowed a sudden bitter lump in his throat.

"Ah, yes, I see." Serxio nodded. "But there's more, isn't there?"

"I did not wish to have any attachments in that house," Christopher rushed out. "They were servants so my father treated them badly. I didn't want to care about them, because I couldn't help them. Such caring would have just caused me additional pain and would have done them no good at all."

Serxio's expression softened further. "Oh, Christopher, I am so sorry. How hard that must have been."

Christopher found the lump was bigger and were his eyes burning with unshed tears? That was madness!

"Not as hard as it was for them!" Christopher got out. "They were the ones starved and beaten. I avoided that. For a time."

But Serxio still looked at him with empathy and understanding. "Now I understand why you don't wish to have anything to do with the past."

"You should understand why the past wants nothing to do with *me*," Christopher said, sticking out his chin as if asking for it to be struck.

Serxio embraced him. Christopher stiffened. He was going to push Serxio away. Silly, foppish Serxio who dressed as if he was wearing a visual scream. But instead, Christopher sagged against him and began to bawl. Not just cry, but bawl. Ugly, ugly tears that kept coming and wouldn't stop. His nose snotted and dripped down over his lips and chin. His body shook as he clung to Serxio and wept.

It took seemingly forever for the emotional storm to pass. He was hiccuping as his breathing settled and he felt strangely scraped clean inside. He was about to wipe his face on his sleeves when Serxio handed him a handkerchief. He nodded his thanks. He scrubbed his face and blew his nose.

"I don't think you'll want this back until it's washed." Christopher held up the soggy handkerchief.

"Probably not." Serxio smiled gently.

"I can't believe I let go like that. I don't cry. I don't…" Christopher let those words drift off.

"You've been holding it in for a long time. You feel things, Christopher. You care about people. You've just been trying to protect yourself against a bully of a man," Serxio said. "No, not just a bully. A *monster*."

Christopher's shoulders hunched. "Finn will need me when he sees Father again. And Miles. Gods, Miles is so far gone. Finn will be devastated even though Miles does not deserve his caring."

"Finn will be all right." Serxio paused and then said, "You know… you do not need to go. You can stay here. You have work to do. Very important work." Serxio patted his shoulders. "I will let them know you can't attend."

"But--"

"Don't worry. I'll make it all right. You stay here. I'll let you know later how everything goes. And I'll want to hear more about what you've discovered." Serxio gave him another pat.

Christopher watched Serxio leave the laboratory. His mind was curiously blank, but his heart felt warm. He was cared for. He was *safe*. Maybe not from the undead, but from the real monsters now. And, if he wanted, he could stay here and no one would stop caring for him. No one would think him a coward. They would all understand and love him anyway. Christopher scrubbed his face one last time. Then he left the laboratory.

He found everyone by the sound of laughter. He dreaded being the one to end that joy, but he knew once they got past the shock of seeing him again--and when he faded into the background--all would be well again. But this had to be done, even if it would upset things. For he was going with Finn to Tanglewood. He would be there if Finn needed him. And maybe he needed to face his father, too.

When he stepped over the threshold into the rose garden, he saw the merry group around a table filled with food and drink. Serxio was leaning down and speaking to Finn and Rohan about him he was sure. It was Jacob who spotted him first.

"Christopher!" Jacob cried and his voice surprisingly remained merry. "There you are! Finn and

the king were just telling us about how you devised a way to kill the undead!"

Christopher blinked.

"That was very brave, Christopher!" Magna nodded. "And smart. But we all know you're very smart."

"Aye." Emmott gave a mostly toothless grin.

"Christopher, I'm so glad you're here," Finn said, half rising from his chair. "We thought maybe that--"

"I didn't kill Old Jonathan. I just pretended I did," Christopher blurted out.

Everyone stared at him open-mouthed. Serxio was the only one who made a slight gesture for him to explain further. It was as if the foppish young lord *knew* that there had to be a good reason for what he'd done. No one else would ever have thought that of him.

Christopher swallowed and got out, "He passed away of natural causes. I checked, because Father… Father is a bastard and I was afraid he was cutting corners and the food was bad. I thought that the rest of you might be… at risk."

Finn's expression went soft and loving. "You were worried. You were looking after us."

"Why didn't you say that at the time?" Jacob asked, but gently.

"Because… because I was afraid of him. Maybe I could do something on the sly, but if he heard a word of it…" Christopher cleared his throat and got out, "It was easier to be thought as evil as he was or worse. Maybe worse."

Finn came over to him and hugged him. He held Finn back very hard for just a moment. When he went to pull back, Magna was there and *she* grabbed him and held him against her for long moments, only ending it with a kiss on his temple. Jacob vacated his seat and offered it to Christopher, who attempted to decline, but Jacob insisted.

"I've sat enough. I want to move," Jacob assured him.

"And you must have something warm to drink and eat," Magna insisted as she fixed him a plate of food and a cup of hot chocolate. "We're going to need all of our strength for what's coming."

"If you're sure you want to go, Christopher," Serxio said with a meaningful look.

"I do." Christopher sipped the hot chocolate, enjoying the warmth and sweetness traveling down his throat. "I think I need to."

TANGLEWOOD

Rohan glanced over at Finn who rode beside him on a pale horse. He had on the long black, velvet jacket and hood that Milius had just delivered that morning. There was silver embroidery of ravens along the hem. Finn looked solemn and beautiful and every inch of the Fae prince he was. But Rohan was worried.

After seeing the stoic Christopher crumple this morning--despite him also now being with them on a brown mare named Nelly--Rohan saw that the depth of the damage that Lord Gerard Steward had done to his children was far deeper than he'd realized. Christopher noticed him looking over and gave him a brief nod. His face was porcelain pale and his knuckles had progressively gotten whiter the closer they neared Tanglewood.

Perhaps he should have simply had the Guard remove Gerard from the manor, perhaps from the *kingdom*. Dropkick the bastard into some other territory and threaten death if he dared to come back. The stepbrother Miles would have been given the opportunity to join Christopher at the castle. Christopher had made clear that his younger brother had no aptitude for alchemy, but he was clever with clothes.

"He really is," Finn had agreed. "With a needle and thread he's managed to make some plain clothes look quite a lot more elaborate. And he's got a good eye regarding materials and cut. Things that I don't even understand, but he's often right."

"If only he would have picked up his own clothes," Magna sighed.

"Or wash them. At least brushed them down! Let alone, put them away," Emmott moaned.

"Perhaps Milius would take him on as an apprentice!" Serxio suggested.

"Miles *work*?" Christopher's disbelieving tone showed what he thought of that.

"I would normally agree with you, Christopher," Finn answered. "But tailoring is his passion. He might not see it as work."

"I am not saying to not try to reach him," Christopher remarked with a sigh. "But you must remember who you are dealing with and not be disappointed."

"Miles has been given bad principles," Jacob said, which was something that Finn had said in other words, but Rohan saw where he'd gotten his own principles from. "But new ones can be learned."

"Regardless, we can't leave him with Lord Steward!" Magna shuddered.

"No, I wouldn't do that to my worst enemy," Emmott added.

"We might not be leaving him," Christopher answered glumly. "He might *choose* to stay."

Now they were just down the lane from Tanglewood. Rohan knew that they were getting close, because in the sea of brown grass and empty fields, Tanglewood was blooming because of Finn's

magic. The air that had smelled dead and empty now was filled with the scents of wild flowers, ripening fruit warming in the sun, wheat, corn and grapes. This was what all of Rirea should smell like. He saw the six Guards that rode after them, craning their noses into the air to catch a whiff of that glorious smell. The Guard were not there to protect Rohan, but to deal with Gerard, depending on what Finn determined he wanted done with him.

"Did no one notice the difference between Tanglewood and the rest of the neighborhood and wonder what was going on?" Leonid gestured to the ragged lands around Tanglewood.

"Finn did warn us that it would be too obvious to hide this year especially," Magna said with a sigh as she looked out one of the carriage's side windows.

She and Emmott were riding in a small carriage while the rest of them had horses.

"The other estates didn't look this bad last year," Emmott pointed out. "So it didn't stick out so much."

"People were noticing though," Jacob commented as he rode up next to Leonid and Serxio. "I heard whispers in town. But while Lord Steward wasn't loved, he wasn't feared either, so no one thought he could be the one behind the transformation."

"They thought he was an interloper. A shopkeeper pretending to be nobility," Christopher muttered. "And that's exactly what he is."

"The gentry can be cruel and unwelcoming," Serxio sighed, likely thinking about his mother's reaction to his lost love.

"That's true for some. But he didn't help himself much in how he behaved all high and mighty either," Magna pointed out. "Here we've got a king and a prince who got Emmott and me up in a carriage with their own hands. Lord Gerard would never do that. He'd have us walking behind in the mud and dust!"

"My riding days are over," Emmott sighed. He patted the carriage's window. "I could get used to going around in this."

"Emmott!" Magna tsked. "We're lucky the king let us *look* at this carriage, let alone *sit* in it."

"I'm glad you're both comfortable," Rohan stated simply.

"More than that. But I'll tell you what, even though you are as kingly in leathers as you are with that lovely crown on your head now, King Rohan, Lord Gerard will likely mind his tongue more with you here dressed like that," Magna said.

Rohan was not in his full kingly regalia, but he did have on his shiniest boots, black pants and coat with a bold red and gold silk shirt underneath. He wore one of his more modest crowns, which was made of silver and studded with a single large ruby in the front. He had chosen these things, not because he wanted to impress Gerard, but because he wanted the man as Magna had said to "mind his tongue." He had no desire for this to be less pleasant for Finn and Christopher than it already seemed it would be.

"People were coming to ask Father what his secret was regarding the land," Christopher suddenly said and his jaw tightened. "They were willing to do *anything* to learn it. But that was after Finn disappeared so all of his plans to fleece them were gone. He lost his chance to lord it over them."

Finn glanced over worriedly at Christopher. "And he blamed you for that?"

"I was responsible. I made you go out into the woods that day," Christopher answered.

"I was going out anyways," Finn assured him, adjusting his leather gloved hands on the reins.

"Yes, but you might not have been at that place at that time--"

"It wouldn't have mattered." Finn shook his head. "Father sent Tyreon to find the person responsible for stealing life from the Empire. Tyreon showed up there, because I was there. He would

have tracked me to the house or into town otherwise. It simply wouldn't have mattered where I was. He would have found me and brought me home."

"Home," Magna breathed, "Prince of the Empire. Should have known."

"Did none of you meet Thalanil when he was dating my mother?" Finn asked.

"I saw him once, I think. He arrived on a dragon," Jacob said, his forehead furrowing as he remembered the long ago past. "But he always wore a hood and they never stayed long. They always went to the Empire."

"Did it end badly, Finn?" Magna asked.

"Yes," Finn answered, not explaining why that was.

"I thought so. She was so forlorn at first when she was pregnant with you, but then she seemed to just pull herself together as she always did and moved on," Magna said.

"Did he not want to marry her?" Emmott asked. "She was nobility, too."

"Yes, but she wasn't fully Fae. She looked more human than Fae," Finn answered. "But that wasn't why she ended it."

"*She* ended it? A love affair with a king?" Magna boggled.

Finn smiled sadly. "Neither of them stopped loving one another, I think. There was… a misunderstanding."

"What a terrible thing! Not just for love to end, but for it to have led your mother to marry Lord Gerard Steward! I'm sorry, Christopher, but your father is not a good man," Magna said.

"I would agree with you 100 percent, Magna," Christopher answered wearily.

They went around a bend in the road and the manor and stables were visible. The manor was beautiful, made out of dark gray stone with flowering vines winding up the sides, and glittering casement windows. Rohan could well imagine Finn sitting in one of those windows with a book, gazing out and daydreaming.

But he never had time for that. He was working here. Slaving away.

Rohan's hands tightened on his reins.

"He's let the lawn go." Jacob frowned. "I can only imagine the state of the fields. And the stable's been left open."

"That's how I left it," Christopher admitted. "Everything's how I left it. I don't think they've come out since then."

A pall of unease settled over the group. Without the *clip clop* of horses' hooves on the road, it was eerily silent. There was only the churr of insects and the whisper of the wind through the untended grass. Rohan slid down from his horse. The others soon joined him. They stood there, uncertainly, staring at the front of the house that looked like a person who had closed their eyes for good. Was the manor sleeping or dead?

Finn pulled down on his tunic to straighten it. "We must go to them, I think. I'm not meeting him on the mat. This is *my* home."

"Do you wish us to come with you?" Jacob asked, his hands fisting at his sides.

But Finn shook his head. "No, just Rohan, Christopher, Serxio and Leonid will accompany me. I'd appreciate it if you three could look around the property to see what needs doing immediately."

"Of course, Finn, but are you sure you don't need us for moral support?" Emmott got himself out of the carriage, ready to go inside and protect the Lord of Tanglewood.

Finn smiled softly at him. "Thank you, Emmott, but I'll feel your support just by knowing you're here and safe."

"Whatever you need, Finn," Magna said. "Oh, forgive me, I should be calling you by your

honorific! Lord Finn or Prince--'

"Finn is exactly what I want you to call me, Magna," Finn assured her. He looked at Rohan. "Let's go in."

Rohan walked beside Finn to the door. Christopher took his place next to Serxio while Leonid brought up the rear. His Guard captain put a hand on the hilt of his sword, looking quite menacing and official. Rohan stepped aside to let Finn open the front door. But the knob only jiggled.

"Locked," Finn said with a touch of distaste.

"I didn't grab the keys when I left," Christopher said.

"Want me to kick it in, Finn?" Leonid offered.

"No, if it must be forced I can do it. Let me just see if the kitchen door is also locked. I'll be damned before I'll ring the bell," Finn muttered the last.

He strode around to a kitchen door. That was unlocked. Even before Finn had fully opened it, the smell of rotting food rolled out. Finn brought a hand to his nose. Rohan grimaced.

"Magna will be upset about her kitchen," Finn said.

"It wasn't this bad when I left. But I was cleaning up after them," Christopher admitted.

They stepped inside the kitchen. There were dishes crusted with old food in the sink and on every available counter space. It appeared that nothing had been washed up or even scrapped off. Rohan heard crunching crockery under his right boot. He lifted his foot and saw that a bowl had broken and been left on the ground to be smashed to powder. The smell of spoiled milk and rotting meat added to the unpleasantness, but Rohan could see under the mess that the kitchen was a lovely, warm place.

Finn immediately went to a nook near the fireplace where a tattered brown curtain half covered it. He pulled the curtain aside and made a low sound of dismay.

"Christopher, where is the cloak I left in here?" Finn asked.

"I'm sorry, Finn, I don't know," Christopher answered with a shake of his head.

"The cloak I gave you?" Rohan asked as he stepped up to see the cramped little space with a thin blanket and an even thinner hay-stuffed pillow.

Finn frowned at it with consternation. "Yes, I had to leave it here that day. I was hoping to retrieve it. Did Father sell it?"

"He could have," Christopher admitted.

Rohan touched the ratty bed clothes and frowned. "Finn, did you… did you *sleep* here?"

"Yes, it was warm by the fire," Finn answered, still appearing inconsolable about the cloak.

Rohan glanced over at Serxio and Leonid. Both men looked aghast. Christopher met his gaze only for a moment before he stared down at the floor in shame. Rohan didn't know what he had expected in terms of Finn's sleeping arrangements, but must have thought that Finn would have a little room. Not in the family's quarters--though that he did not was obscene--but a little bed and a warm blanket and… but *no*. Finn had *nothing*. Rohan's jaw set. He suddenly turned on his heel and strode towards the interior door out of the kitchen and into the rest of the house.

"Let's go find your stepfather," he growled.

The others had to run to keep up with him. Finn seemed completely unaware at just how angry Rohan was by what that nook represented to him. Finn had slept in a goddamned hole in the wall with a blanket so thin that it was more like spider webs than a covering! He'd been starved and beaten and forced to live as a slave in his ancestral home! And Rohan's uncle had *KNOWN* of Finn's suffering and let it continue!

"He's been sleeping in the study up ahead," Christopher just had time to get out.

"GERARD STEWARD! GET OUT HERE NOW!" Rohan roared.

Lightbringer pulsed bright as day in its scabbard at his waist. Finn's eyes widened. Serxio fingered his daggers. Leonid looked ready to cut Gerard's head off.

There was a frightened silence, but then there was a clatter of footsteps on the stairs to their right and a young man appeared on the landing. His face was pale as milk except for the bruise on his left cheek. His mouth was open in an "O" of surprise and alarm. This must be Miles.

"Finn! Christopher! You've--you've come back!" Miles gasped.

"Is he a victim of this play or a villain, Christopher?" Rohan asked tightly.

He didn't ask Finn because he knew Finn's good heart would call Miles a victim no matter what he was.

"Both," Christopher said. "Like me. But… I don't know if he sees it that way."

"You--you're that man from the woods. But you have a crown on and…" Miles petered off.

"Miles, this is King Rohan De Clare," Christopher said tightly. "Where's our father?"

"The--the *king*?" Miles squeaked and he clattered down some more steps before attempting to bow and kneel at the same time, which just had him nearly falling over.

Serxio caught him. "There'll be none of that, young man. We need to know where your father is."

Miles pointed with a shaking hand towards the closed door where rumbling noises were starting to emerge. They heard coughing and hacking followed by spitting. Miles began to tremble and shrank behind Serxio. Christopher was so pale he appeared to be glowing.

The study door banged open and a very big man filled the doorway. His dark hair was long and hung in greasy locks around his unshaven face. Burning, alcoholic-reddened eyes met Rohan's. Ham hock-sized hands flexed by tree-trunk sized legs. Rohan could suddenly well imagine how Lord Gerard Steward could have terrorized his household. He was built like an angry bear and, evidently, had the personality to match it.

"Who are you?" Steward growled just like the old bear he was, disturbed from his den.

"Your judgment, Gerard Steward," Rohan snapped.

Gerard's eyes widened slightly at his tone. But then he saw Christopher. "You've returned, whelp?"

"Only to see you go," Christopher sneered.

"Go? We'll see who goes!" Gerard snarled and stepped towards Christopher.

Rohan stepped between them. "Stop! Remain where you are until I say otherwise!"

Gerard's hands formed fists and he leaned towards Rohan until their noses were inches apart. His lips were speckled with spittal as he growled, "Whoever you are, you will find--"

"He's the goddamned king, you old bastard!" Leonid's sword was out of its scabbard and thrust towards Gerard's unshaven cheek. "You back the Hell away from him before I run you through!"

"And you won't just be run through once, but three times!" Serxio lifted his daggers. "Which is three times as bad!"

Gerard took a slow step back. His lips pursed as his mind started to put things together as he looked at all of them fully for the first time. Those bloodshot eyes finally landed on his crown and stayed there.

He doesn't seem to recognize Finn. Now that Finn's not a starving waif in rags I bet he can't imagine the young man to my right is his stepson.

When Gerard finally spoke, he sounded like he wasn't sure if he was awake, "You can't be. The king in my house?"

"It's not *your* house, Gerard. It's never been," Rohan contradicted.

Alarm entered Gerard's expression, almost guilt, as if the jig was finally up and he'd been

waiting for it to end for a long time.

If only I'd known about you earlier, Gerard. The damage you've done is incalculable.

"What--what do you want?" Gerard asked again.

"Leonid, open the front door," Rohan ordered, not answering Gerard's question.

The front door was to their left. Leonid smartly went over to it, unlocking it and pushing it open. Daylight flooded the darkened foyer. Gerard blinked and held up a forearm to shield his eyes.

"Get out," Rohan said to Gerard and jerked his head to the door.

"This is *my* house!" Gerard insisted again. "You have no right to--"

Lightbringer rang as Rohan pulled it from its sheath and aimed the tip at Steward's throat. "Get. Out."

Finn would not be forced to speak with this creature in his own house. Rohan would not have any of them subjected to this cretinous man.

"Christopher, Miles! Help me!" Gerard growled. Neither young man moved. "Are you going to let him take my home? *Your* home?"

"We stole this house. It's not ours," Christopher answered.

"You boys are useless!" Gerard roared.

"Father, don't be angry. I'm sure it will be explained. Everything will be all right," Miles cringed.

"You're an imbecile, Miles! They're stealing our home! Taking it for themselves!" Gerard cried.

"No, we're giving it back to who it belongs to," Rohan said.

Gerard still refused to acknowledge--or even recognize--Finn. For his part, Finn stood there silently. His eyes were shadowed. His mouth was set in a straight line. Rohan did not know what memories were running through Finn's head at that moment, but he doubted they were good.

"Move, you boil on the butt of humanity!" Leonid gestured with his sword to the door. "Don't make the king repeat himself."

Gerard slowly edged over to the front door, his hands partially up as if in surrender. Rohan held Lightbringer steady as the old bear backed away, beady eyes flashing in every which direction. He was still dangerous. Rohan could feel it. He could lash out in some last ditch effort and hurt someone. Rohan would not allow it. Rohan and Leonid followed him out while the others stayed behind.

Gerard appeared even more wasted out in the sunlight than he had in the gloom of the foyer. His hair was scraggly and oily. His waistcoat was spotted with food stains and wrinkled so badly it was clear he hadn't changed out of it in some time. There were dark circles under his eyes. His lips were cracked and there was dried drool in the corners of his lips and on his beard. While being outside allowed Rohan to truly get a look at the other man's physical state, it also wasn't until they were outside that Gerard seemed to really *see* Rohan and accept that the crown on his head was real and not an illusion.

Yes, Gerard, I really am your king. This isn't some alcohol-induced nightmare. You're really at the end of things.

Gerard's nostrils flared as fear set in. He must have heard the Guards' horses whinnying and jerked his head towards them. The Guard, seeing their king and captain with their swords drawn, immediately unsheathed their blades and jogged over. Gerard was utterly surrounded.

"My king?" Leonid asked. "What would you have us do with him? And, please, have it be something that I would want to do!"

"Stand down, Leonid. Simply keep him here for now," Rohan answered, sheathing Lightbringer, though he never took his eyes off of Gerard.

"Damn, I was worried you were going to say that," Leonid muttered. When Gerard glanced at him, he jabbed his sword towards him, though he didn't touch him, as he added, "Don't you be getting any ideas. You move an inch and I have all the excuses I need to end you."

Gerard bared his teeth, but said nothing.

"I will return," Rohan said before turning on his heel and heading back inside.

Finn had gone into the shuttered study and had opened the shades so that more light poured into the foyer. Rohan heard him say, "Oh, by the gods. He's destroyed her books and… the cloak!"

Finn was talking to himself as the others remained in the foyer. Rohan closed his eyes for a second. He would see to it that *everything* was restored that could be restored. He would somehow make up for what his uncle allowed to happen here. He opened his eyes to find everyone watching him with concerned looks. They could see he was upset. But what were his feelings now compared to what they had all gone through?

Rohan turned to the study where Finn stood by a highbacked chair that had been moved from behind the large wooden desk to in front of a sputtering fire. He was holding the cloak that Rohan had given him--now soiled and torn--in one hand and a book in the other whose pages had been ripped out evidently to be used as kindling in that fire. The walls were covered in book shelves, but they were now mostly empty. Finn looked up at him. There were tears on his cheeks. He quickly wiped them away.

"Foolish to be upset by the destruction of books. They weren't unique. I can… can perhaps buy them again," Finn murmured. "The cloak is ruined though."

Rohan sheathed Lightbringer and went to his beloved. Finn sank into his arms, fingers digging into Rohan's back, crying silently against his chest. Rohan stroked his hair and kissed his forehead. He thrust his own anger and dismay down so he could give Finn all his attention.

"It will be all right," Rohan promised. He kept saying that. But would it be? Yes, yes, he would make it so. He would help Finn in any way the young man needed and would allow.

"Thank you for making Gerard leave the house. I don't think I could control myself much longer if he'd still been here," Finn said. "He didn't even seem to see me, though!"

"You aren't the poor little boy he last saw."

"But that's not who I am! That's not who I ever was!"

"No, it's not."

"Every ounce of this house needs to be cleaned. Scrubbed clean of him. This room is permeated with his stench." Finn shuddered.

"It will be. I swear it."

"Some part of me wonders if I can ever be happy here again, or will the bad memories overwhelm the good?" Finn murmured.

If Rohan had his way, Finn would only visit here upon occasion, but he would *live* in the castle. But he did not say that now.

"What do you need from me? I want to be whatever you need," Rohan said, his voice gruff.

"I'm not sure." Finn pulled back, but still held onto him. His expression was bleak.

"His crimes towards you--slavery, false imprisonment, stealing your estate--under the law, would qualify for execution," Rohan said.

Finn gasped. "Death?"

"I would give it to him easily and gladly," Rohan said.

"I could kill him with a *touch*." Finn shook his head then. "But that doesn't feel like justice. Death is almost too easy."

"I understand, but…"

"*But*. I know. He cannot be allowed to continue harming people," Finn said.

"He could be imprisoned. Hard labor. Twenty-five years to life," Rohan offered.

"Prison would mean he would remain in Rirea, wouldn't it?" Finn asked.

"Yes, in the mines," Rohan answered.

"So even if he were far away from us, he would still be in Rirea," Finn said. "I would feel him. So would Christopher and Miles. I wish him *gone*."

"Then I have one other suggestion. The Guard can take him to the border, expel him, and tell him that if he returns he will face death," Rohan offered.

Finn slowly nodded and then his expression hardened as he said, "Yes, yes, that is the right course. But I wish to speak to him first. He will know why this fate is his even if he will not own it."

WHO WE ARE

Finn held onto Rohan for one more moment before he released the Rirean king. As always, being with Rohan strengthened him. His grief at seeing his mother's destroyed books and then the cloak eased a little. The *cloak* that Rohan had given him had been ruined. His stepfather had wrapped himself in it. Rohan's cloak. His stepfather's scent permeated it. Finn's stomach flipped even as his hands clenched.

"Are you all right?" Rohan asked. "What am I saying? I know you aren't."

"I will be. You're here." Finn kissed Rohan.

"And I will always be with you," Rohan promised.

"You say that in this place and I can't believe how lucky I am. Everywhere I look here are mostly bad memories now," Finn admitted. He leaned against Rohan's large chest. "I thought it would be different to come back here free. But… I underestimated the weight of the past."

"This was your mother's study?" Rohan asked.

Finn nodded. "She used to read these books to me. I made her promise that we would read every single one together. When she died I was forbidden to come in here," he swallowed, "but I used to sneak a book out and read before I went to bed. Most nights though I was just too tired."

Too tired with too little food and too little clothes to keep warm. A slave in my own home.

Rohan picked up one of the shredded volumes. "While we cannot get these back, we can get copies, exact editions, all of it."

"Thank you." Finn smiled at him then said, "These books aren't *her*, I know that. Her things aren't her. Just as her body wasn't her after she passed. And my memories of her are untouched by the destruction here." Finn gestured around them at the shredded books and empty shelves. "But I had hoped…" He paused but then pressed on as he realized he needed to acknowledge this, "I know what my stepfather is, but I kept hoping that perhaps I was wrong. I thought that it was because I was Fae that he couldn't love me. But now I see that he didn't love anyone. Not my mother. Not Christopher or Miles."

Rohan's expression went dark and Finn saw his jaw clench. The Rirean king had been so furious when he'd seen Finn's nook and took in Miles' black eye and Christopher's anxiety. Finn had almost thought that Rohan would kill his stepfather right then and there in the foyer in order to cleanse the evil of him from this place. He almost wished Rohan had. But that was wrong. This was not Rohan's burden, even if he would take it from Finn's shoulders.

"I know that you haven't told me a *tenth* that happened to you in this house," Rohan said finally.

"If I tell you it becomes real." Finn shrugged. "And then the hatred and anger I forced down for years… Well, it will overwhelm me."

"But what about justice?" Rohan shook himself. "I'm sorry. This is not for me to judge. This happened to you."

"No, you're right." Finn bit his lower lip. "When I was in Aymar there was a merchant who was going to beat Jani, the little Fae girl from the village. Do you remember her?"

"Yes, of course."

That would be so like Rohan to remember the least of people in terms of rank or importance as if they were kings and queens too.

"Well, she was stealing from his cart. She was starving. And I… I threatened him. Used my powers to destroy a piece of fruit," Finn admitted. "I had no doubts about standing up for her. But every time it's for me, some part of me thinks I've deserved whatever has been done. I'm a half-blood Fae! A fatherless child! Who killed his mother."

"You know that is not true, but my words likely have little effect." Rohan put his hands on Finn's shoulders. "Our mind is sometimes our greatest enemy, and only we can slay it."

Finn nodded. "That's true."

"But there were many who *should* have come to your defense, to stop what happened here. My uncle among them. I have been avoiding him as you have been avoiding Gerard, I think," Rohan said with a sigh.

Finn let out a breath. "You would have saved me if you'd known what was going on here. I know you would have."

Rohan gritted his teeth and nodded. "You saved yourself. But yes, if I would have come here I would have brought you to the castle and we would have always been together."

Finn's eyes burned with tears for a moment. "I am so loved now that whatever happened in the past cannot overshadow the present or the future."

"You are loved from the depths of my soul." Rohan swallowed.

They embraced again. It was wonderful, but too short. Yet Finn did not want to be in this house any longer than necessary. It might never truly feel like a home to him again, but he would ensure it provided one for Magna, Emmott, and Jacob.

"What do you want to do next?" Rohan asked.

"First, I have to see what's going on with Miles. He doesn't seem right. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I miss how he used to be all snobby and rude," Finn admitted.

"He reminds me of a dog that's waiting for a blow," Rohan agreed.

"Yes, most definitely. Then, after that, we deal with my stepfather," Finn said.

"Whatever you want, we will do," Rohan said.

"He took this." Finn touched the cloak, but shuddered when his fingers brushed over the fur.

Rohan caught his hand. "I have others. I will have dozens made for you."

"I know, but this was *ours*. Our first time together. The day that changed my life forever." Finn shuddered again.

"He can take *nothing* from you, from us. Not anymore."

Finn nodded. But he still left the cloak where it was.

They went out of the ruined study that stunk of alcohol and body odor into the foyer. His gaze went immediately to Miles. Serxio was being his usual, wonderful self and had an arm around Miles' shoulders, attempting to comfort him. The bruise on Miles' cheek and the way he kept shrinking away from even Serxio, had Finn feeling sick inside.

Rohan is right. He's like a beaten dog.

Miles' eyes flickered wildy about, but then landed on Rohan. Finn hoped that the presence of the

Rirean king--not to mention his crown--would jolt Miles out of this painful behavior. His stepbrother was, if nothing else, a snob as he had said. Surely, being this close to the Rirean king would stir his social climbing heart. But Miles' eyes just flickered to Rohan and then away.

"You've… you've come home, Finn, to--to help?" Miles asked in a high, almost childish voice.

Finn sighed. Did Miles think that Finn had returned to serve them again? Maybe he was farther gone from reality than even Finn had supposed.

Christopher snapped, "No, you idiot! Finn's not here to *serve* you and Father--"

"I didn't mean that! I didn't!" Miles cringed. "I just thought he could help with Father. Father's been so *angry*."

"He's been drunk!" Christopher growled and shook his head. "And Finn is Prince Finrael Ravenspar. He's Lord of Tanglewood. Not Father! Not you! Not me! We have no place here!"

"Christopher." Finn gently put a hand on Christopher's arm. His eldest stepbrother was shaking with rage and pain. Finn understood. Like himself, Christopher had shoved down all his hurt and anger until it threatened to boil over in the moment. "It's all right."

"He still thinks you've come to clean up after him. That he would *want* you here in this house with that monster…" A shudder ran through Christopher. "He wants you to clean his prison cell."

Finn glanced at Miles who was not meeting any of their eyes. "I don't think he's well, Christopher."

"He's just hiding from reality! He did it after Mother died. He knows very well what's going on," Christopher said bitterly. "No more playing heir to the manor. No more being served. He's hiding his disappointment about that behind a child-like idiocy."

Finn wondered if Christopher meant those things or simply *hoped* that was the cause of Miles' behavior.

Miles murmured, "You said he was a Ravenspar because of the birds, Christopher. There are more birds."

Finn realized he was pointing to the embroidered ravens on his coat. "Yes, Miles, Milius--that's the King's Tailor--made this for me to honor my heritage."

Miles looked up with big, wet eyes. "The King's Tailor? He--he has one? Of course. And he made you clothes."

"Yes, Miles, I came back unexpectedly and needed some new things," Finn explained awkwardly.

Miles' behavior was truly distressing. He glanced over at Rohan. Did he see what Finn did? Finn didn't think Miles was playacting at all. Being alone with his father had unhinged Miles. He hadn't seemed quite right when they'd spoken through the Luminus. But now? Now he seemed utterly broken. Finn thought it best if his step brother was out of the closed atmosphere of the house. Maybe some sunlight and fresh air would help.

So he asked, "Serxio, would you mind taking Miles outside?"

"Of course, Finn. Let's get you in the sun there, Miles," Serxio said and started to lead Miles out the door.

"No! Not by Father! Not by Father!" Miles ripped himself away from Serxio. His back slammed against the bannister painfully. Yet he still ground himself against it as if he could get farther away from the door and Gerard.

"Miles, stop that! You're hurting yourself! You must stop!" Serxio said and glanced at Finn for instruction.

Christopher walked over to his brother and yanked him away from the bannister. "What are you

doing, Miles? You must stop this game now!"

"Are you going to hit me with the rock, Christopher?" Miles asked piteously.

"What?!" Christopher jerked back from him as if burned. "I never hit you--"

"But will you? Will you?" Miles repeated.

Christopher stared at him in horror. "What the hell has he done to you? Your clothes… you haven't washed or changed them… When was the last time you ate?"

"The food has been gone for a few days," Miles whispered. "Just crumbs and rotten stuff." He made a face. "Nasty."

Christopher's hands clenched. "Why didn't you go to the store? Or to a neighbor's? What about that girl you like so much? Ah, Tanna? Taneesa?"

"Terena." Miles smiled softly. "Her parents won't let her see me anymore. The money's gone and Finn was gone and you were gone."

"You could have *left* here with me!" Christopher snapped. "Why wouldn't you come? Why wouldn't you help me? Why did you choose this?"

Miles stared down at his too thin hands. "Father needed me."

"He doesn't need you Miles unless it's as a punching bag!" Christopher cried wildly.

"He needs me," Miles replied mulishly.

Christopher threw his hands up and turned from his brother. There was anguish in his expression. Finn knew what he was thinking. Christopher blamed himself for not making Miles come with him. But he couldn't have done that. And Finn was so glad that he hadn't stayed himself.

"Serxio, can you stay with Miles?" Finn asked.

"Yes, Finn, no worries. I'll be here." Serxio reached to pat Mile's shoulder, but his stepbrother shied away from the touch. Serxio winced.

Christopher was holding himself so tightly that Finn thought he might rip the sleeves of his tunic off. He was purposefully not looking at Miles. Finn felt pain in his heart for both of his stepbrothers. This was not a happy moment even though he hoped it would lead to those. He still felt that exiling Gerard was the right move. Killing him would leave a greater mark on his step brothers and himself. Keeping him here, even in prison, would cast a shadow. He had to tell them what was going to happen.

"Gerard is going to be exiled," Finn said. Miles went very still and whined low in his throat. Christopher grimaced. "I'm going to tell him and then the Guard will take him to the border of Rirea and he'll be gone."

"He'll try to come back, Finn," Christopher said.

"He won't go," Miles whined.

"He will go and he will not return." Finn's voice darkened. "I will ensure that he will not return."

The shadows seemed to grow in the foyer. They took the form of a gigantic raven. Christopher's eyes widened and he gasped. Miles cowered.

"Finn, ah, I think… oh my, magic," Serxio muttered.

"Magic, indeed," Rohan breathed.

For a moment, Finn saw himself with a crown of glittering silver on his head, dressed in black with a throne behind him and a raven sitting on his shoulder. *The* raven. He had not seen the bird since he'd arrived in Rirea, but now he thought he heard the fluttering of its wings. The image of him--cold and piteous--faded from his mind and he felt strange. He reached back blindly and grasped Rohan's hand. The darkness receded.

What happened there?

"Are you all right?" Rohan asked.

Finn wasn't sure, but he nodded. "I'm sorry. I'm…"

"You've been so calm since we got here, Finn," Christopher said with a wry smile, "I'm glad to see that we're not the only ones who are upset."

Finn drew a shaky hand over his suddenly sweating brow. "Yes, you're right. But when I get upset…"

"You wouldn't have hurt us, Finn," Serxio said loyally.

"No, you wouldn't have," Rohan assured him.

Finn forced himself to take in deep breaths. That almost had him gagging as the smells from the study wafted to him. He covered his mouth and nose. His stepfather had violated every part of this house. He had turned its other occupants into ghosts of themselves. If the merchant deserved to be afraid then Gerard deserved far *worse*.

"You are welcome to come out and say your piece to your father if you wish. You will be perfectly safe if you do so," Finn promised. His stepfather would not hurt anyone here ever again.

"He's not worth my time." Christopher turned and stalked off.

Miles was all big eyes and trembling limbs so Finn had his answer there. He and Rohan headed for the front door and the blessed clean air. The Rirean king was letting him be fully in charge of this. He was grateful for it. He needed to see this through. Maybe Christopher could walk away and be done with Gerard Steward, but he couldn't. He needed closure.

Maybe I want justice… or revenge.

Leonid had his stepfather's hands and ankles bound with iron manacles. But Gerard tried to stand up straight and look like he wasn't a prisoner. His stepfather appeared far more awake and aware than he had in the foyer too. His red-rimmed eyes fixed on Finn, finally recognizing him. Perhaps it had been the white hair or the new clothes or the fifteen pounds Finn had added to his lean frame that had kept his stepfather from recognizing him before, but no more. Now his eyes widened and his lips parted.

How did I not see how afraid you were of me before? Now you should be.

"Finn!" his stepfather said in almost a parody of his once booming voice. It was thicker and a little wheezing. "You're alive!"

"I heard you didn't want to give me a funeral," Finn said, stopping a few feet from his stepfather.

"Oh, we--we would have, but I still had hope you were alive! And I was right!" his stepfather lied. "Christopher said you'd gone into the Empire, but--"

"I did. We did," Finn cut him off. "I found my father. My *real* father."

Why was there such joy in saying that? Gerard had never wanted that position. Finn had assumed that because he hadn't that no one would. Thalanil's beautiful face floated in Finn's mind's eye for a moment. His father loved him. So very much.

"Oh? You did, did you? And what was his explanation for abandoning you for over two decades? I ought to get compensation from him for caring for you so well!" Gerard laughed at the last as if it were a jolly good joke.

Rohan moved slightly beside him. Finn turned his head towards the Rirean king and Rohan stilled. Gerard was trying to be offensive. It was all he had left.

"He didn't know I existed," Finn answered.

"Really? Are you sure he's not lying? Some men don't want the responsibility of a child, especially a half-breed," Gerard continued his greatest hits.

"He did not know," Finn answered simply without any further explanation.

"So he wanted you, eh? Your mother was quite foolish then not to get his support while she was alive! You cost quite a bit to keep all these years and we didn't have much," Gerard said. "The boys had to marry extraordinarily well to make up for you not being a viable match with anyone."

"What the Hell are you saying?" Leonid growled.

The sun appeared to dim and there was low thunder in the distance. Everyone looked up at the sky in sudden alarm except for Finn and Rohan. Finn felt the magic stirring within him. Rohan's joined it.

"Not a *viable* match?" Rohan's right hand dropped on Finn's shoulder. "I don't know if you are a fool or a man in search of death."

His stepfather's eyes flickered to the king. How many times had he told Finn that if he didn't do what Gerard wanted he'd be handed over to the Rirean king for execution? Countless times. He'd lived in terror of being found out. And it had all been a lie.

To Rohan Gerard asked, "Discovered what he can do for the land, have you? You can see how beautiful Tanglewood is. He might be able to do that for all of Rirea! And I've kept him safe all these years. That should be remembered! I should be rewarded for it."

Rohan bared his teeth, but no words came out. Maybe he was too shocked at his stepfather's words.

"What did you do to Miles? I know how you hurt Christopher," Finn said, his hands tightening again into fists.

"Christopher? Yes, well, he was always getting into trouble with his potions. I put a stop to that finally," his stepfather said blithely.

"Christopher is my Alchemist!" Rohan snapped. "I've known few who are so intelligent. I can't believe he's your son."

Gerard said nothing though his chapped lips thinned.

"What did you do to Miles?" Finn demanded to know again.

"I did nothing to Miles! He had to put on his own clothes while I looked for new servants. Probably considered it torture," his stepfather chuckled dryly.

"His cheek. That's from a cuff to the face if ever I saw it," Leonid said.

"Well, what *you* think doesn't matter! You're a Guard so--AH!" His stepfather howled as Leonid pushed his bound arms up his back.

"That's Guard *Captain* Blanchet to you," Leonid growled.

"All right! All right! I might have hit him to stop him from whining! You've no idea how the boy can whine! Finn, tell them! Miles is a world class whiner," his stepfather grunted out.

Miles could whine, but Finn highly doubted he had said two words to Gerard that were not respectful or concerned. He was too frightened to do otherwise. But even if he had been a "world class whiner" he didn't deserve that blow. The thunder rumbled again.

"I know that you didn't just hit him once," Finn said with a long exhale of breath. "He's like a ghost of himself. Scared of his own shadow. But he'll recover."

"Of course, he will! He's fine now! Just a little jumpy. We've been all to ourselves recently. No company. But now that you're back, things will be as they always were. But better!" his stepfather practically babbled.

"As they *always* were?" Finn asked.

The thunder rolled across the sky.

"As they *should* have been!" his stepfather corrected. "Now that you've returned, things will be different. You can have your old room back! Eat with the family! Go to school! Whatever you want!"

"So he won't have to sleep in a stone nook? And serve you food? Clean your clothes and make

your fields bloom? All the while, he was starved and dressed in rags!" Rohan's voice was cutting.

His stepfather flinched. "That was… that was probably not right."

"*Probably*?" Rohan repeated.

"It was *not* right," his stepfather amended quickly.

"No, it wasn't," Finn said. "And you didn't just do it to me. Everyone on the estate was treated like slaves."

"If I had done that then why would the servants have returned?" Gerard jerked his head towards Magna, Emmott and Jacob who stood about twenty-five feet away in the field, watching them silently.

"They didn't come here for you," Rohan growled.

"Maybe we could find a little money for one more to help out and replace what you did for the family," Gerard blathered on. "So that you could be free to do whatever you like! School! Art! Books!"

He doesn't even know what interests me other than serving him. Did he see me as anything other than a tool? Finn felt a momentary stab of despair.

His stepfather had been his only living parent for decades. He'd tried to be a good son to him. He hadn't left for many reasons, but one small part of him had hoped that his stepfather had or could or would love him. Just a little. Even after finding his real father, he realized that he still hoped. But that hope was not based in reality or upon this man before him. This man who had harmed so many.

"You honestly think that Prince Ravenspar is going to live here with you playing lord of the manor?" Leonid gave out an ugly laugh. "Good gods, man, you're out of your mind!"

"*Prince Ravenspar*?" Even his stepfather recognized that name and there was a flash of disbelief followed by a grimace.

"You didn't play your cards right, mate!" Leonid chuckled angrily. "You should have been nice to him. Treated him like the son you were supposed to. Then you would have been a friend to the crown prince of the whole damned Empire. But you were a monster and deserve worse than what's coming to you."

"I did my best by him! But he's half-Fae! He couldn't be a part of the family! Your uncle made it clear that every person with a drop of Fae blood was to be killed!" Gerard cried at Rohan.

The Rirean king grimaced.

Gerard continued, "I did him a favor by keeping him! Maybe not in grandeur, but he had food, a roof over his head, and--"

Finn touched his stepfather's chin and Gerard stopped speaking as swiftly as if a switch had been flipped. Thunder rumbled loudly over them. A flash of lightning lit the sky. The shadow was back. A huge raven that spread its wings over his stepfather. The Guard retreated a few steps with only Rohan and Leonid near. But even Leonid was glancing up to see where the monstrous bird was. Finn swore he felt its talons on his right shoulder. The image of himself--beautiful yet terrible and remote--almost like a god passing judgment flashed before his mind's eye.

"I was your slave," Finn said softly. "But no longer."

His stepfather's mouth opened, but no words came out other than a dry rattle. Though Gerard didn't know what Finn could do with this single touch, he sensed it was something terrible. He was right. Finn could see the strands of his life before him. It would be so easy to drain them dry.

Finn continued, "You promised my mother you'd love me like your own son. You lied to her, but we know you don't love your own sons either."

The shadow raven's wings spread further. More low rumbling thunder that came from no storm.

"And when I escaped, you made Christopher into the scapegoat. You tortured and starved him.

Someone far less strong than him would have broken, but he survived you, too," Finn said. "With scars. But he survived."

Another flash of lightning so bright that Finn saw echoes of it before him. He swore he could feel the weight of the icy, silver crown on his head. There was a faint call of a raven as it shifted its feet on his shoulder.

Don't you want this? It seemed to offer. *None can hurt you here. You are death made real.*

"And now we come to Miles," Finn continued, his voice deepening. "In some ways, what you did to him is the worst. Because you twisted him to help you. He knew that if others were being hurt by you then he wouldn't be. You chased most of the kindness from him. Until he was the only one left."

Thunder continued to rumble and lightning streaked across the sky. The raven *cawed*.

"You had the chance to have a loving family, but you chose otherwise," Finn said with finality.

"Who are you?" Gerard whispered, staring into Finn's face.

And that's when Finn saw it. The image wasn't just in his mind. He was reflected in Gerard's eyes. The black, silk clothes, the white hair, the green eyes, the silver crown, the raven and the bone white throne.

"Finn," Rohan said his name, but it sounded like it was coming from a long distance away.

"*What* are you?' Gerard asked in that strained whisper.

End him, the raven suggested. *If he is silenced then the very memory of him will go and you will be free. Completely free.*

"Finn," Rohan's voice was more insistent now, but distant.

"What--what are you going to do to me?" Gerard asked.

What could he do to Gerard? What did Gerard deserve?

Death. Death. Death, the raven said. *Make him pay for everything. Make him dust.*

"Finn," Rohan's voice was in his ear. His hand was on Finn's shoulder, turning Finn away from Gerard. "Finn, come back to me. Please, come back to me."

Finn blinked. His vision cleared. The weight of the crown and the raven grew lighter.

"Finn, I love you. We all love you," Rohan said. "His words mean nothing."

And though Finn knew that Rohan meant Gerard's words, they equally could have meant the raven's. Finn blinked and the weight of the raven and crown were gone. He drew in a deep breath and staggered back a step. His stepfather was pale as a ghost and staring at Finn without blinking. Even Leonid looked a little worried. The Guard were frozen in place. What had they seen?

"Finn, it's all right," Rohan said.

Finn focused on Rohan's face. That beloved face. He reached to touch it and then drew his hand down, afraid that his magic would come out. But Rohan did not appear afraid. He was smiling kindly. He stroked Finn's shoulders.

"Did you see…" Finn licked his lips, "nothing. Nothing. Ah… Gerard?"

His stepfather jolted when Finn said his name. He cringed back from Finn.

"What are you?" Gerard repeated again.

"Who I've always been." Finn wiped off more cold sweat from his forehead. "Gerard, the king will pronounce your fate."

He then turned his back on his stepfather and walked a few steps away.

"Gerard Steward," Rohan said with all the force of his personality and position, "you are found guilty of the grave charges of enslavement, physical and mental abuse, and theft against Prince Finrael Ravenspar, *true* Lord of Tanglewood. The punishment for such crimes is *death*."

"Death?!" Gerard shouted. "But I took care of him! Half-blood bastard--"

Rohan cut him off, his voice arctic, "*But* Prince Finrael has asked for mercy on your behalf."

"Mercy? Yes, mercy. I deserve mercy!" Gerard cried.

"You are exiled from Rirea *forever*," Rohan intoned. "If you should set foot back in my kingdom, the punishment of execution will be reinstated. Do you understand?"

"But I have no money! I have nothing! How will I live?" Gerard babbled.

"It is not a concern of mine or anyone else here," Rohan answered. "Do you understand the judgment?"

"But I will starve! I will be on the streets! I--"

"Here." Finn reached into the pouch at his waist and tossed a few coins at his stepfather's feet. "This is more than you gave Magna, Emmott and Jacob. More than you would have given anyone. Take them."

Pathetically, Gerard leaned over and gathered the few coins on the ground. He didn't thank Finn. He just took the money. Finn looked away again.

"Do you understand the judgment?" Rohan asked one final time.

"Yes, but it's an injustice," Gerard muttered.

"Take him away," Rohan ordered.

Finn heard the clank of Gerard's manacles as the Guard walked him past Finn towards the horses. Gerard would be forced to go before them all the way to the border of Rirea. Then he would be released. Then he would be gone.

Just as Rohan came up behind him and wrapped his arms around Finn, Finn saw that Christopher had watched the whole thing from one of the mullioned windows on the second floor. His stepbrother's face was a white blob in the darkness, but something told Finn that Christopher had seen the crown and the raven. Dread filled Finn's stomach.

What am I?

He'd thought he knew based upon the stories they found but maybe they were wrong.

FAMILY

Meanwhile, in the Empire...

KING THALANIL RAVENSPAR started to regret his journey the moment it began. In his zeal to get answers for Finrael's condition, he had practically fled Aymar, with only the vaguest of instructions to Lady Finnea Beinelis to follow during his absence. And this after his son had revealed to all and sundry that he was a Death Mage!

Panic was sure to have filled the streets and noble chambers of the entire palace and surrounding city. He should have been there to explain to everyone that there was nothing to fear from Finrael. That his son had *protected* everyone from the Ostils and had the gentlest heart. He should have been there meeting with his Council, calming everyone, and making sure that peace, once more, was like a thick blanket over the land.

But, though he had waited and prayed and used all of his healing skill, Finrael had not woken. He had remained so still and cold that Thalanil had feared that he was already dead and beyond saving. He could have sent others to his father's place of seclusion at Faerseton Palace but his father would have sent them away without speaking to them.

Faerseton was situated high in the mountains, clinging to the side of Old Norbreask, appearing as if it might break off and slide down into the valley far below at any second. It was one of the oldest Aeturnal palaces in the Empire and its inaccessibility had kept it from ever being used in modern times. Only his father had lived there in living memory of even the Fae. Now, Thalanil wondered if his father had sought answers there about the Aeturnals. The more he had thought about it, Rohan being born and meeting Finrael as he had could not have been simply coincidence. The Aeturnals and his son had some kind of connection and he would know what it was after his father had helped him heal his son.

He had been arrogant and foolish to ignore Finrael's pleas to learn more about Death Magic and how to control it. Thalanil had thought if he ignored it that it would not touch Finrael. But he had been terribly wrong.

He had teleported most of the way to Faerseton, cutting the time down to a fraction of what it would have taken if he had flown. He used familiar landmarks to leap through space in a moment. He hadn't been able to teleport directly to Faerseton though, as his father's magic shielded the palace and nearby land for nearly fifty miles in every direction. So after getting as near as he dared through

teleporting, he'd then flown Shadeheart hard, barely stopping for anything but the shortest of breaks for them to eat and catch an hour or so of sleep.

The wyvern hadn't seemed to mind. Thalanil hadn't been flying Shadeheart enough and the wyvern craved the skies. As they flew nearly without stops, he promised the great beast that he would be rewarded with the fattest calves and suckling pigs when they returned home.

The cold, clear air burned his lungs and nipped at his face. He drew the fur cloak tighter around himself. He wished he were by his son's side, the warm summer breezes caressing both their faces. He wished that Finn would wake up and be well again. He wished…

He saw Faerseton with its soaring towers, spearing the clouds, directly ahead of them. He dug his heels into Shadeheart's sides and urged the beast to go but a little faster. They landed on a jutting piece of rock that extended out from Faerseton's gated entry. The gate was up as if waiting for him.

Thalanil frowned. It had never been up before when he'd sought an audience with his father. Had his father heard he had a grandchild? A grandson who was a Death Mage, too? It was like the old curse was determined to be addressed. His brother first. Now his son.

But his father did not come and meet him. There were no other signs of welcome either. Other than the whistle of the wind and Shadeheart's harsh breathing from the long ride, he heard nothing. Faerseton seemed deserted, but he knew his father was there. He could scent his magic.

And something else. But what? Unpleasant to be sure. Familiar, but I can't place it.

Many times he had come here to plead for his father to return to the world. There were so many things going wrong in the Empire that he needed someone's judgment he could trust implicitly, but his father had ignored him. He'd camped outside for a fortnight, expecting to wear his father down. But it hadn't worked. Laiex Origeiros Ravenspar had not spoken a word to him. So Thalanil wasn't waiting for an invitation this time. He was going in. His father *would* talk to him even if he had to pry every word out of the old king.

Sliding off of Shadeheart's back, Thalanil took the wyvern's reins and led the great beast towards the open heavy, metal portcullis that should have cut off the castle's entrance from the slab of granite he was on. The moment that Thalanil reached the gate, he knew that something was very wrong. During his last visit, he had noticed a magical seal upon the metal that would have thwarted most mages. But not only was the gate not down, but the seal was broken. He smelled burnt ozone.

Magic thwarted. That's what it was!

The gate had been slammed upwards into its home in the stone. It was twisted and wrecked. It would never come down again. The courtyard beyond was still mostly covered in snow. But there were further signs of a battle that the wind had not yet covered up with white. He drew one booted foot along the ground and saw a scorch mark.

"Father?!" Thalanil called out before he even thought about what he was doing or the fact that whoever had done this could still be there.

But his father could be injured! Whoever had burst in here was strong. Or there were many of them. Working together. He saw that now. There were dozens of foot marks just partially obscured by the snow. He dropped Shadeheart's reins and he ran. It was as if an army had attacked Faerseton.

But who? Who would do this? Marikoth? Could he reach this far?

He raced past the cracked and empty fountain, through the shattered doors, along rooms where fires still burned, and the scent of his father's magic hung heavy in the air. He sent his senses outwards. He felt life forces above him. He unleashed more speed, practically flying up the stairs of the main tower. He went around and around until he reached the top and the stairwell emptied out into a large circular room.

It was a massive library. The walls were covered with shelves filled with books that stretched to the domed ceiling far above him. But it looked like a bomb had gone off. Singed papers lay everywhere, some of them still smoking. The desk in the center was on its side and pieces of it were smashed and crushed. The giant windows that stretched to the ceiling were shattered and icy mountain air poured in. That was when the two beings made of fire turned towards him. They were long and sinuous like snakes. They flew through the air, heat waves wafting off their bodies, which appeared to be made of flames.

Fire elementals! Who cast these?

But he had no time to wonder more as the fire elementals attacked. They opened their mouths and emitted streams of liquid fire right at Thalanil. He cast a shield that blocked the flames, but he felt the heat.

While one of them continued to blast his shield with fire, the other attempted to flank him. He saw it slither away, lighting the bookcases on fire as it got too near them. But then it passed in front of the smashed windows. Thalanil's eyes narrowed.

While he used one hand to continue summoning the shield, his other hand shot out towards the other fire elemental. A cone-shaped burst of air exited his fingers, striking the fire elemental head on and pushed it out of the tower and into the sky beyond. It didn't extinguish the flames, but it dimmed them and gave him time to hit the other elemental with all he had.

The shield changed into a blast of icy water. Thalanil pushed that water towards the fire elemental. The fire stream got shorter and shorter as Thalanil thrust the water towards it. With only six inches between the fire elemental and the water, the creature attempted to flee. But Thalanil engulfed it in a ball of water. The water boiled as the creature thrashed inside, but he kept creating more water until the flames went out and the elemental was snuffed out.

The second fire elemental let out an angry hiss as it barreled back into the room. Fire blooming hotly along its length. Thalanil formed super cold ice all around it. The ice smoked and cracked as the elemental tried to burn through it, but Thalanil starved the flames of air and the elemental let out a final cry before it winked out of existence. The ice cage fell to the ground and smashed.

For a moment, Thalanil breathed deeply to recover, but then he was racing around the room, looking for his father. Two elementals could never have overwhelmed his father. He had a feeling that those two were just what was left behind. He snuffed out the burning books and all the smoldering paper, as he searched for his father. But it was to no avail! Had his father been taken?

There was a clicking sound, like the turning of a dial, and a section of one of the bookcases rotated on its axis, opening up with maddening slowness. A darkness was revealed beyond. Thalanil brought up both hands before him, they were limned with red fire, and he prepared to destroy whoever--or *whatever*--emerged.

A figure waved into view. They were staggering forward. One arm outstretched towards him while the other was pressed to their side where rich, red blood bloomed on their tunic like an obscene bouquet of roses. As they stepped into the sunlight that came through one of the windows, Thalanil leaped forward, his magic extinguished, to catch the figure as it fell forward.

"Father!" Thalanil cried as he caught his father's tumbling form.

He quickly turned him over onto his back, cradling his head and chest with one hand while the other limned in white-gold light with healing magic. He immediately held it over the terrible wound on his father's side. He poured energy into the older Fae who breathed easier with every pulse of his magic. It was strange to look down upon a man who he so resembled. Fae did not grow old. They came more into their looks and power as time progressed. Yet though his father still looked as

handsome as he had when Thalanil had last seen him, and yet, he seemed faded somehow.

"Enough, enough, you won't be able to do more without--without stopping the poison," his father gasped.

"Poison? What poison?" Thalanil demanded to know.

"Arachnid venom. But we don't have time for that! I have to tell you--ah!" His father's face contorted with pain and he jerked forward in Thalanil's arms.

"It doesn't matter what you have to tell me! It can wait!" Thalanil started to gather his father in his arms. Just like the spell warding the gate he sensed his father's teleportation protection spell was gone too. He needed to bring the older Fae to Aymar. "I am bringing you home--"

"Thalanil, please listen! They have it!" His father coughed and blood flecked his lips. But he gripped Thalanil's arm with great strength. "I've done something so *foolish*."

"Whatever it is, Father, we will fix it," Thalanil assured him. "Now let me--"

"I've been talking to him. I couldn't just abandon him and he's getting *sick*--"

"You have a Luminus!" Thalanil caught sight of one of the orbs in the corner of the room. A mixture of confusion and betrayal wound through him. His father had a Luminus and he'd been talking to someone on it, but not him! He hadn't even answered Thalanil's entreaties for weeks!

"Yes, yes, that's how we kept in touch, especially after you created the Wall." His father's face spasmed with pain. "I couldn't just abandon him. I couldn't--"

"You're talking about Marikoth," Thalanil realized.

He felt numb as he stared at the Luminus. His father had been talking to his elder brother this whole time. His *enemy*. But he'd refused to speak to Thalanil at all.

"Yes, yes, I know what he's done. I know why--why you bear no love for him," his father gasped.

"You told me he was *dead*. I only discovered he was alive when he killed my friends and tried to kill me!" Thalanil's voice rose as he spoke until he was yelling at the end.

He drew in a sharp breath and forced himself to stop speaking. Betrayal, rage, hurt wanted to be released. But his father was injured! This was not the time! Not the time! And yet, he could not help recall how his father had always favored Marikoth while his mother favored him. Yet his mother had been killed. And his father had withdrawn from him after that. He'd been orphaned for all intents and purposes.

"I know. I know. I'm *sorry*." His father clawed at his arm. "Thalanil, I have failed you and so many others. But it is worse than you know. Let me--let me tell you!"

"What?" Thalanil finally was able to ask. His voice was low.

"I've seen Marikoth failing. Every decade, every year then every month and now, every day, he grows weaker and more ill," his father said.

"You believe--"

"It is a process that happens to all Death Mages! They are unbalanced and the more they use their powers the worse that unbalance gets," his father rushed out.

"He's *not* ill, Father. He misled you."

"No, he *is*. He doesn't know the truth of it. But I can see." His father swallowed heavily.

Thalanil took a water skin from his belt and offered it to his father. He drank greedily due to the blood loss.

"You're wrong. He's more powerful than ever." Thalanil shook his head.

"Either way, I believed him. And I was going to go to him," his father said.

"You cannot get through the Wall. Tyreon could not have aided you without my permission--"

"Which you would *never* have given," his father added with a touch of bitterness.

"No, I wouldn't have! Because, even if you don't know what Marikoth is, I do! I might as well slit your throat myself as let you go to him!" Thalanil cried, even as his heart twisted.

His father had wanted to go see Marikoth, tend to Marikoth, while Thalanil was saddled with all the responsibilities and duties of the Empire! An Empire in the worst shape it had been for millennia. But instead of being by Thalanil's side and helping him steer their people to safety, his father had only thought of going to the side of his eldest son.

"I know. And I would not ask that of you," his father wheezed. "He's a Death Mage, Thalanil, but that doesn't make him bad intrinsically--"

"I know that! Being a Death Mage is not what's wrong with him!"

"You blame him for your mother's death but he didn't mean--"

"Father, I have a son!" Thalanil nearly shouted to get through to the man.

"A--a son?" His father's expression cleared of pain for a moment. "I did not know--"

"Because you would not speak to me! Because you punish me--"

"No, I punish *myself*. I cannot contaminate you with my wrongs. I let a Death Mage live and I--"

"My son is a Death Mage, too!"

"No, that's not possible." His father frowned deeply.

"It is. Finrael is wonderful. He's not like Marikoth."

"There can be only *one* Death Mage at a time," his father insisted, coughing and speckling blood on his lips.

Thalanil wiped the blood up and gave him more water. "Whatever you believe doesn't matter, because it's true. Finrael is a Death Mage. I love him. I'm not killing or exiling him. I came here, because I need your help to teach him how to master his gift."

"It can't…" His father stared up at the ceiling as if lost in thought, but then shook himself and moved restlessly in Thalanil's arms. "I'm losing the plot. You need to know what I did. What they have."

"Tell me."

"I knew you wouldn't let me go to Marikoth. I understood. But I meant to go anyway. And so I made a device. Just completed last night," his father said.

"What device?" A cold chill ran through Thalanil.

"One that can allow the user to take down a section of the Wall."

Thalanil closed his eyes. "Did you *tell* Marikoth you'd finished your device?"

His father nodded as a coughing fit overtook him and speech was impossible. Thalanil used his magic to ease more of the pain, but he could feel the poison moving sluggishly within his father's body, sapping his strength, draining his magic, and slowly killing him.

"And then you were attacked this morning?" Thalanil asked, but it was almost to himself.

"Yes, but the ones who came were our own," his father wheezed.

"Our own?" Thalanil frowned.

"They were disguised, bore no House seal, but I recognized them. Paquens," his father said.

"Paquens?!" Thalanil let out a disbelieving laugh. "Elidyr was just trying to insinuate Finrael was a Death Mage at the last Council meeting and now you tell me he's *working* with Marikoth?"

"The Paquens will *never* be chosen by the gods to rule, my son." His father's faint smile was wry. "They must have decided to seek other means."

"Marikoth won't let them rule either!" Thalanil shook his head.

"Desperate people believe foolish things." His father looked stricken then as if he was finally considering he might be one of those people.

And if it was Finrael who appeared sick and dying, would I not be the same way? Would I not want to comfort him? Father did not bring Marikoth here. He was going to go there… ah…

"But the Paquens were not alone. There was one--one I saw that there was a Beinelis among them," his father got out.

"Beinelis?" Thalanil repeated the name as if he could not believe it. He *did* not. He had, after all, left Lady Finnea Beinelis in charge while he was gone. She was in the palace with Finrael who was likely still unconscious in his room. If she was a traitor… "They must be working with Marikoth."

"Perhaps. They did know of my device, but--but they might have other reasons, Thalanil," his father gasped as he plucked Thalanil's shoulder. "Our reign has not been without controversy. And we took control after the betrayal of the Aeturnals. We have, in a way, earned betrayal back."

Thalanil thought of Rohan. Though the Rirean king had seemed honest in his caring for Finn, his parents had been killed by Fae, his land was failing, so perhaps *he* was behind this betrayal as insane as that sounded. Was there no one he could trust?

I can trust Finrael. And he needs me. We must return to Aymar now.

"If they just left you then it will take them some time to return to Lady Finnea Beinelis or Lord Paquen," he said.

But his father was shaking his head. "No, they had the Ring of Passage. They teleported away."

They could be anywhere! They could be handing the device to Marikoth or Rohan or some other enemy! Thalanil growled internally. *I will wring the information from a Paquen or Beinelis neck! They will feel my wrath!*

Thalanil gathered his father in his arms and phased to the courtyard. Shadeheart lifted his head inquisitively, snorting when it scented his father's wound and the poison still coursing through his body. He levitated up upon the wyvern's back, holding his father securely in his arms, and formed a portal back to Aymar and the wyvern tower.

Is it already too late? Thalanil wondered. *Will I be in time to stop my enemies?*

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